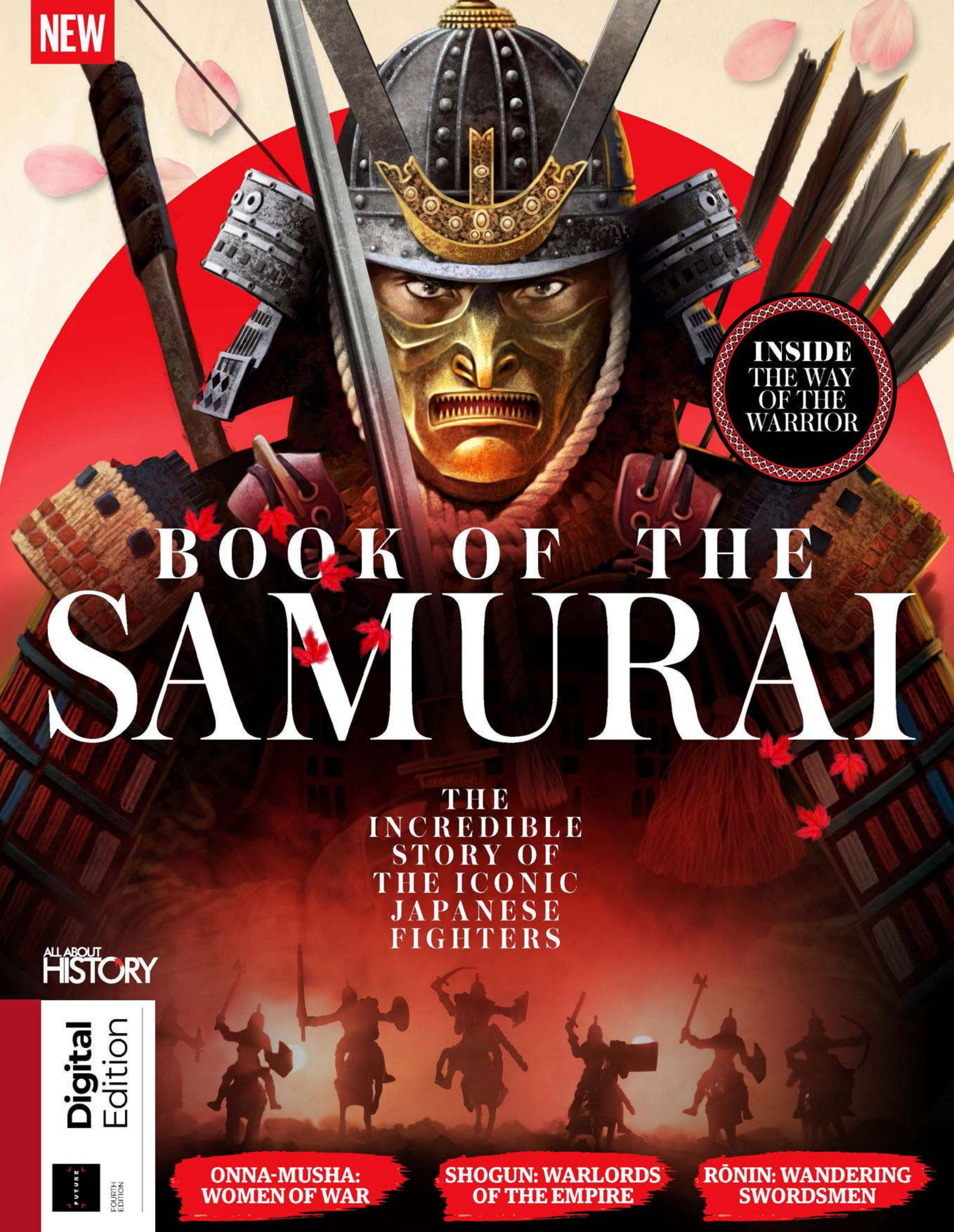

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FUTURE

BOOK OF THE SAMURAI

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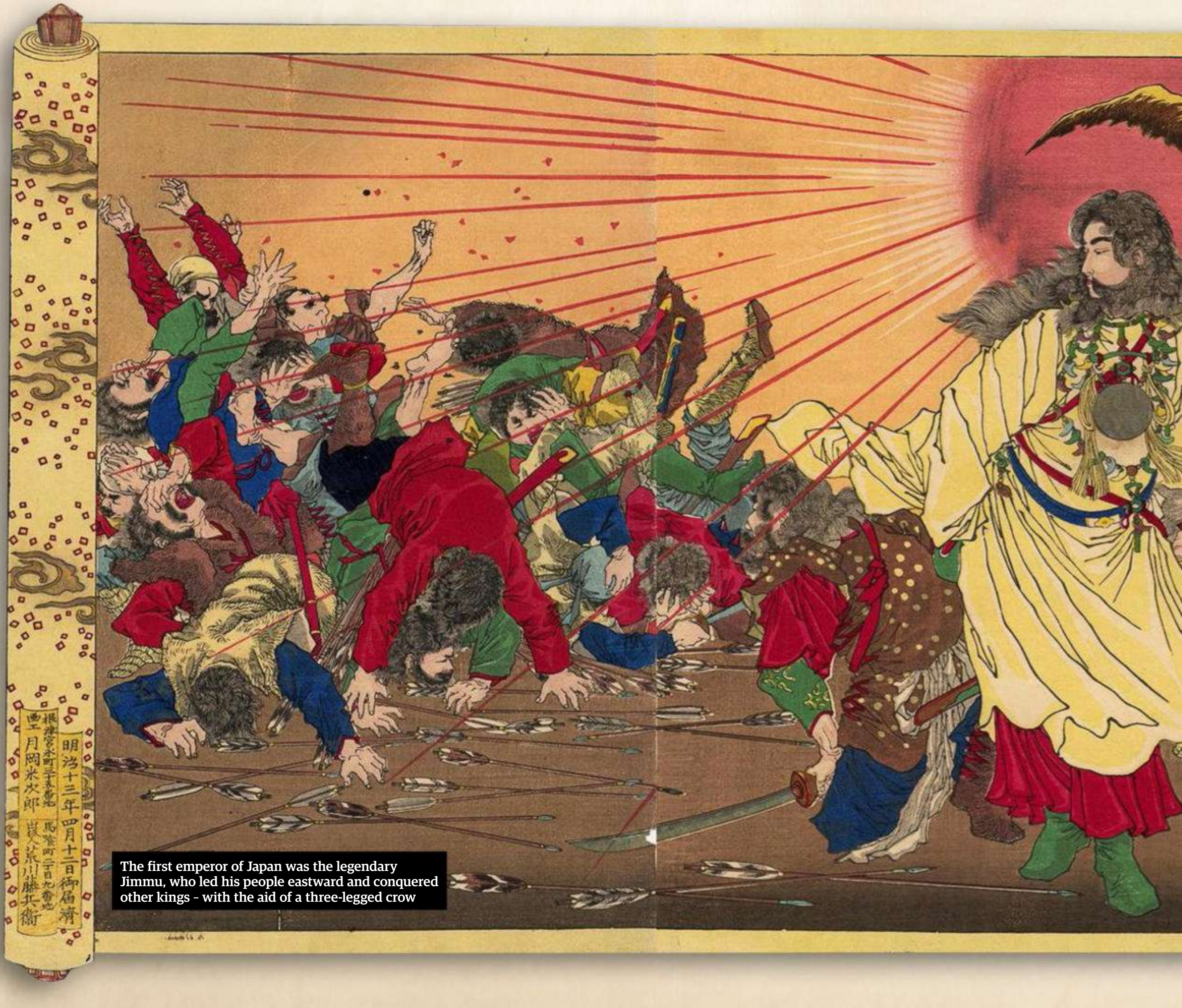
God emperors and warrior queens

The earliest history of Japan is shrouded in myths and legends of emperors descended from gods and queens who waged bloody wars

Written by Ben Gazur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The first emperor of Japan was the legendary Jimmu, who led his people eastward and conquered other kings – with the aid of a three-legged crow

The human history of Japan dates back at least 30,000 years. At that point, the four main islands of Japan were connected and land bridges joined them to both Korea in the south and Siberia in the north. The first humans to occupy what is now Japan simply walked in.

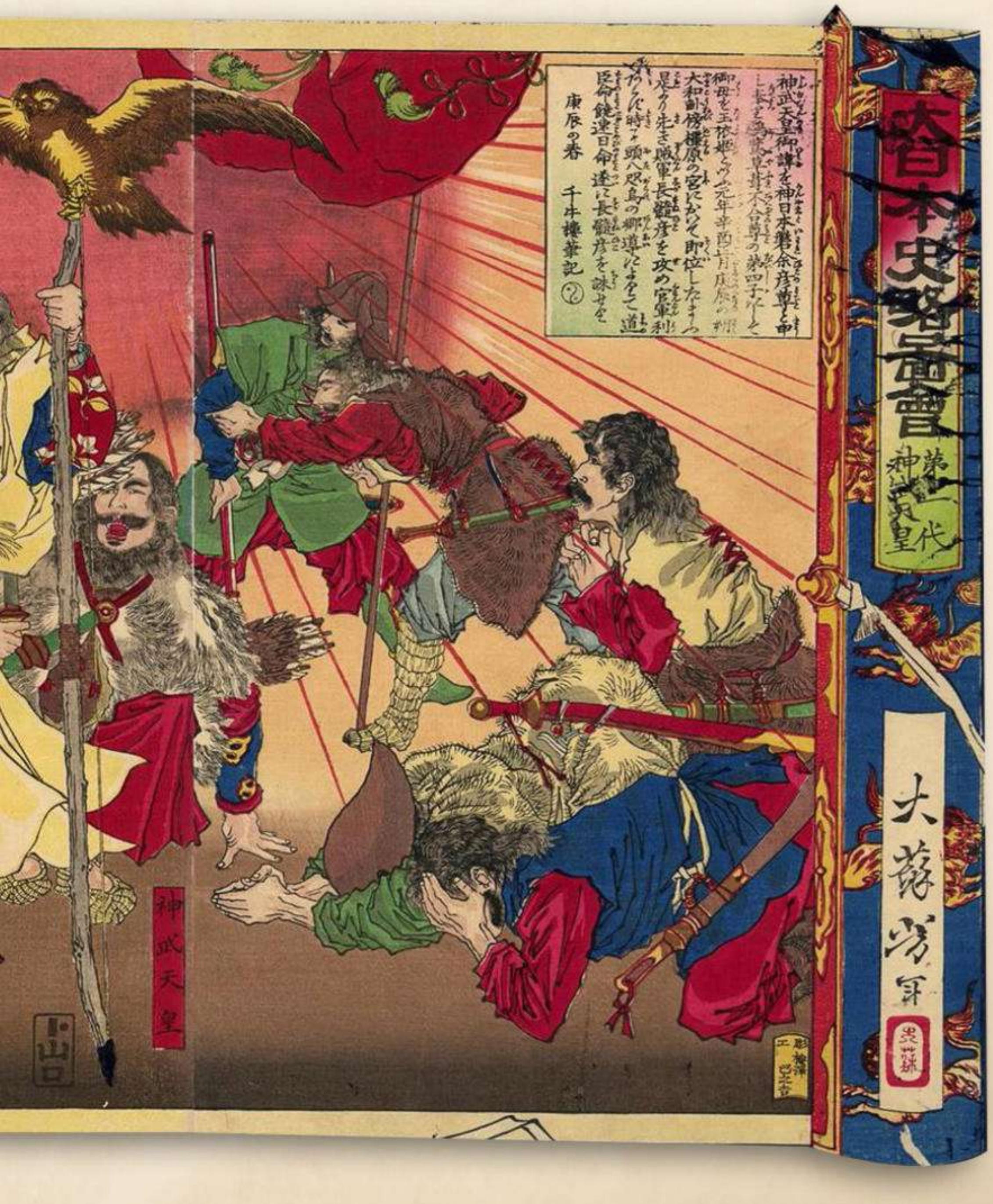
While their stories remain in the archaeological record as flint tools and the remnants of settlements, we know almost nothing of their history. The development of writing tells us what the Japanese said about themselves. What little does emerge may be part-myth and part-truth, but it reveals a society often riven by war.

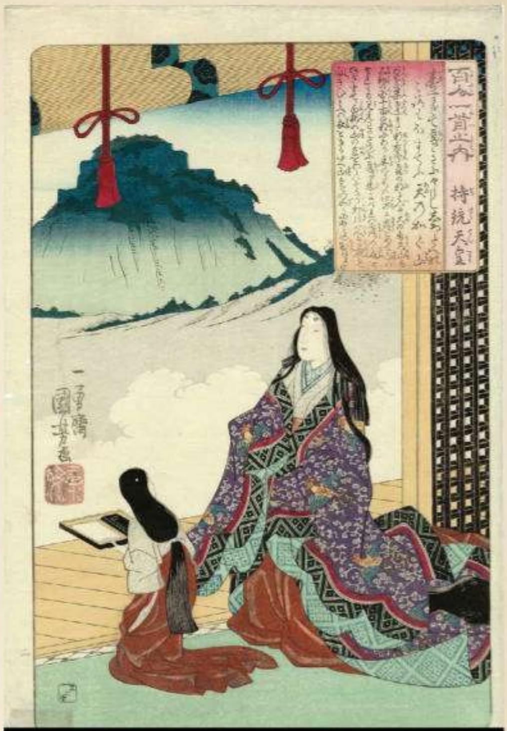
THE JOMON AND THE YAYOI

The first culture to develop in Japan was the Jōmon around 10,000 BCE. We do not know what the Jōmon called themselves, but their name comes from their distinctive pottery style of intricately arranged cords, which archaeologists call Jōmon, meaning rope-patterned. Some of the pottery created by the later Jōmon would not look out of place in a modern art gallery. Their stylised pottery statues of people known as dogū so closely resemble spacemen in suits that some take them to be evidence of alien contact.

Contact with space aliens is unlikely, but when contact came between Japan and Asia it spelled the doom of the Jōmon people. Climate change around 1000 BCE saw them driven further south in Japan by cold weather. The Yayoi of China lived in a lush environment that dried out around the same time to create the Gobi desert of today. This destruction of their homelands caused a wave of migration. At first settling in Korea, the Yayoi then began migrating to Japan around 300 BCE. With their arrival, 10,000 years of Jōmon culture disappeared from the archaeological record.

Not much is known about the displacement of the Jōmon. Was it in a single wave of migration? Were they destroyed by warfare? The alternative is that the Yayoi came in smaller numbers over a long period and integrated themselves.



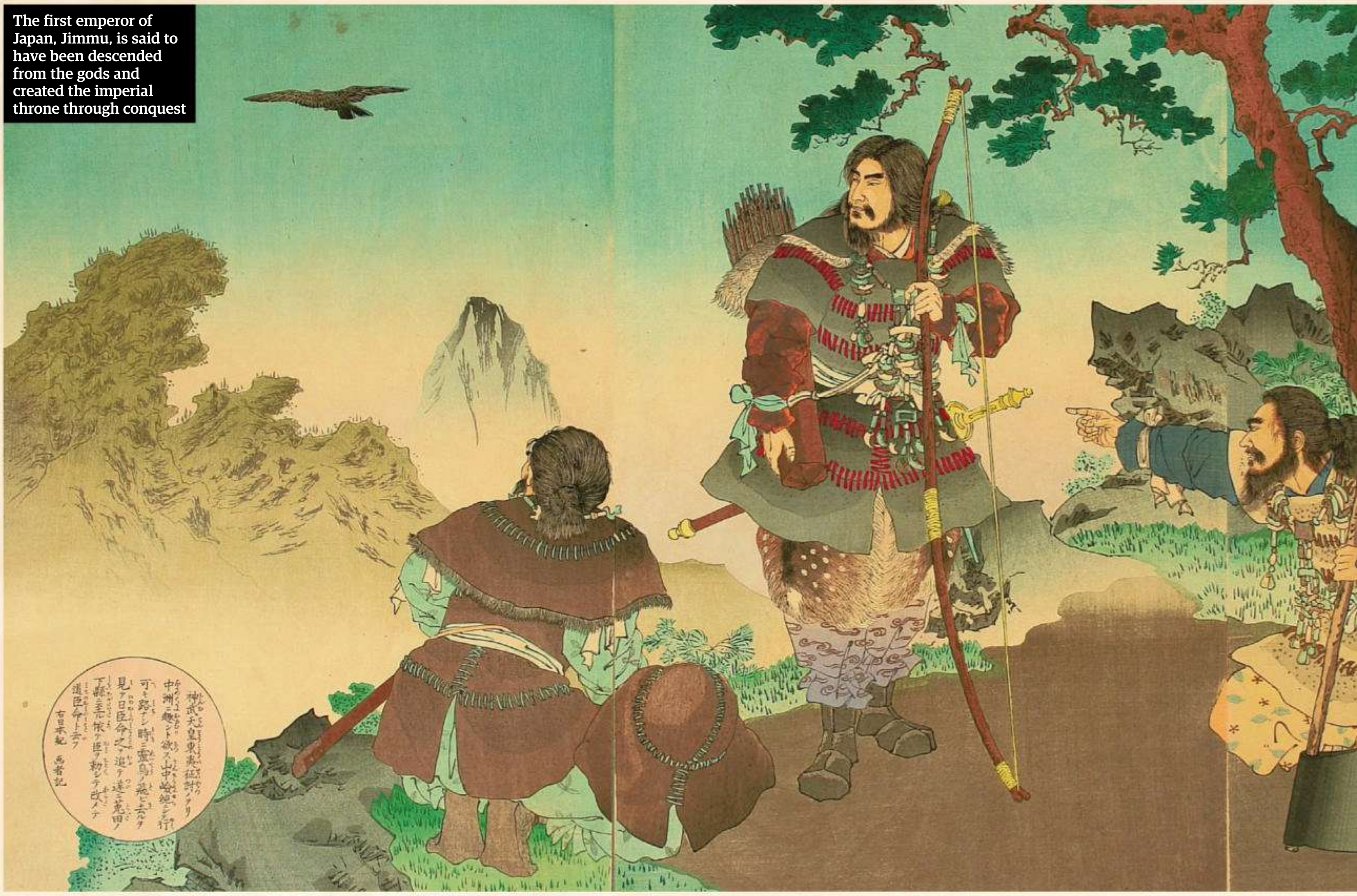


The Soga clan and then the Fujiwara clan came to dominate the royal court through marriage of their daughters into the imperial family

Recent analysis of DNA has revealed that on average, a modern Japanese person derives only around ten per cent of their genes from the Jōmon. However the Yayoi came to Japan, their offspring swamped those of the Jōmon. The indigenous Ainu of Japan share more DNA with the Jōmon though, so it is possible some aspects of Jōmon culture survived in them.

Because of their lack of a writing system, our knowledge of Yayoi culture is limited. We do know that they formed clans called uji. At the head of each clan stood a man who mediated between humans and spirits, or kami, as well as acting as a military leader. Over times these clans grew in power and territorial size, forming the first states in Japan.

The Yayoi brought crucial innovations to Japan. The cultivation of rice emerged at the same time as the Yayoi arrived. The stone tools of the Jōmon were abandoned in favour of metal implements that allowed greater working of the land. Weapons and armour of bronze and iron reached Japan around the same time, mostly imported from China or Korea because of the lack of metal ores in Japan. By the 1st century CE, axe heads, spears and swords made of iron were becoming common



The first emperor of Japan, Jimmu, is said to have been descended from the gods and created the imperial throne through conquest

throughout Japan. Conflict between clans drove the need for ever more weaponry.

THE FIRST EMPEROR

According to the two great works of Japanese legend written in the 8th century CE, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, the first emperor of Japan was Jimmu. Born in 711 BCE, Jimmu was a descendant of the goddess Amaterasu and, with his brothers, was the leader of a clan. They sought a location to cement their rule. "By dwelling in what place shall we most quietly carry on the government of the empire? It were probably best to go east."

Together they led their people east. Jimmu was provided with a sword that was magically sent by a deity to use in battle. As they travelled east, they fought a clan under the command of Nagasunehiko - the long-legged man - and were defeated. Jimmu realised that because they were fighting eastwards, they were fighting against the rising of the sun and so approached from the east, under the guidance of an eight-foot-long crow. This time Jimmu was victorious and settled the land of Yamato. We are told that he "extirpated the unsubmissive people".

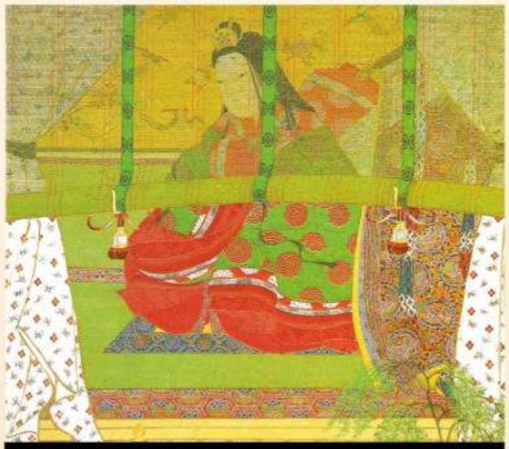
Other clan leaders accepted the right of Jimmu to rule, thus marking his accession as monarch of Japan. Alongside other improbable facts, we are told that Jimmu lived to the age of 126. The chronicles that set down the life of Jimmu were written over 1,000 years after his supposed rule. Many consider Jimmu to be wholly legendary, but some wonder whether the tale of his migration might have echoes of the coming of the Yayoi people to Japan.

THE CIVIL WARS OF WA AND QUEEN HIMIKO

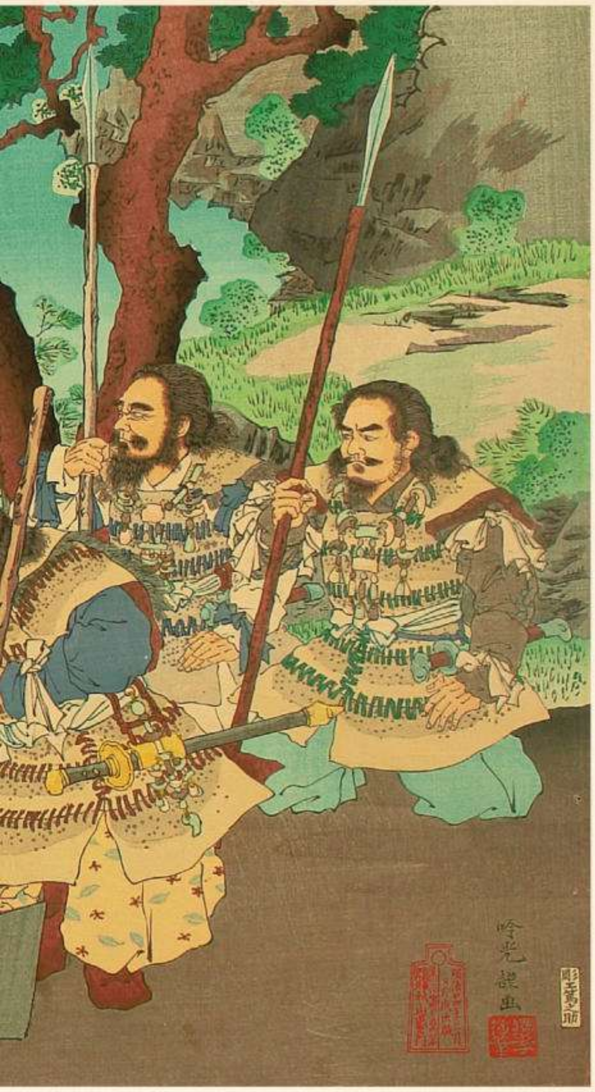
Much of Japanese history at this early date is conjectural and little can be known for sure. Early Chinese accounts of their interactions with the Japanese, who they called Wa, record the trade of iron weapons and also the reasons they may have been required.

According to Chinese sources: "During the reigns of Huandi [147–168 CE] and Lingdi [168–189 CE] the country of Wa was in a state of great confusion, war and conflict raging on all sides. For a number of years, there was no ruler. Then a woman named Himiko appeared. Remaining unmarried, she occupied herself with magic and

"Peace was restored but did not long survive Himiko's death"



Empress Kōken abdicated but continued to influence behind the scenes - until she retook the throne with the monk Dōkyō by her side



sorcery and bewitched the populace. Thereupon they placed her on the throne." This civil war of the Wa is the earliest historical war in Japan of which we have a written record, but much remains mysterious.

Himiko is said to have been a shaman and queen of Yamatai, whose location remains unknown. We are told she lived in a palace surrounded by ever-vigilant guards. She had 1,000 female attendants, but only one man who relayed her orders. Apparently Himiko was a great ruler and brought peace to her kingdom. She sent emissaries to the Chinese court and received praise in return.

Himiko did not pacify all of Japan, however, and Himikuko, ruler of a rival state, rose in conflict against her. Peace was restored but did not long survive Himiko's death. "Then a king was placed on the throne, but the people would not obey him. Assassination and murder followed; more than 1,000 were thus slain. A relative of Himiko named Iyo, a girl of thirteen, was then made queen and order was restored."

Japanese sources make no mention of Himiko, but some scholars have sought to link her with other powerful queens of around this time.

JINGU AND THE SEVEN-BRANCHED SWORD

Empress Jingū is said to have reigned from 201-269 CE following the death of her husband, Emperor Chūai. Chūai died without any obvious heir, and Jingū acted as regent for their unborn child. The *Nihon Shoki* gives an account of her rule and the many acts of warfare she carried out.

As soon as Jingū came to the throne, she sought to put down potential rebellions. We are told that one village leader, Hashiro Kuma-washi, would not obey imperial decrees because he was "a fellow of powerful frame, and had wings on his body, so that he could fly, and with them soar aloft". Jingū struck down the rebel and pacified the region. In one area she avoided battle by executing the sister of an obstreperous general as a warning.

Jingū's greatest exploit, however, was her invasion of Korea. She announced that she "intended in person to chastise the West". Understanding that it was a patriarchal society that she was attempting to lead, she informed her army: "Although I am a woman, and a feeble woman too, I will for a while borrow the outward appearance of a man, and force myself to adopt manly counsels."

With a mighty fleet and army, Jingū crossed the sea, taking up a battle-axe herself. When the enemy king saw the forces arrayed against him, he surrendered, completely and utterly. Other kings and lords also offered rich annual tributes to Jingū. After returning to Japan, she finally gave birth to her husband's heir – a full three years after his death. Much, it may be assumed, is legendary in the tales of Jingū, but many historians do believe that there was a reigning empress around this time to whom myths and tales of Jingū were later attached.

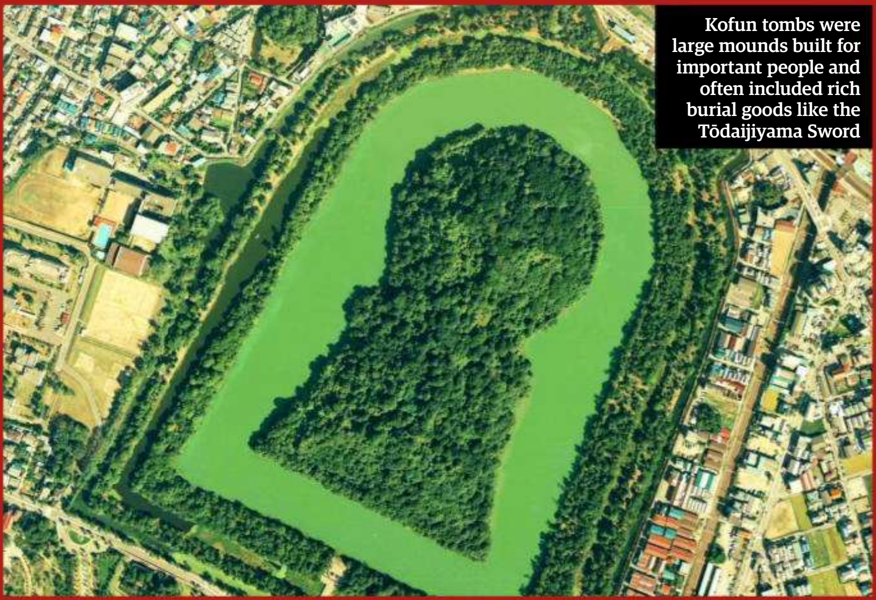
The Tōdaijiyama Sword

The Kofun tombs of Japan were the burial sites of important Japanese people – people who were often sent to the afterlife with rich grave goods like swords

In the 140-metre-long tomb at Tōdaijiyama, one sword was found that revealed much about Japan in the 2nd century CE.

Inside the tomb were 29 iron swords. One of these, 1.1 metres long, was inlaid with a Chinese inscription in gold, reading: "This ornate sword was manufactured in an auspicious day of the fifth month in the… Zhongping era. The metal from which it has been wrought has been refined many times; it is pure… The fortune of the one who wears it will accord with the stars…" The Zhongping era refers to the rule of the Chinese Emperor Ling of Han, which spanned from 184 to 189 CE.

Was this sword sent from China to a Japanese king? All we can know is that the sword was a treasured item. The tomb it was found in was built in the 4th century, 200 years after the sword was first forged. Other inscribed swords are known, but the Tōdaijiyama Sword is by far the earliest.



Kofun tombs were large mounds built for important people and often included rich burial goods like the Tōdaijiyama Sword

Image source: National Land Image Information (Color Aerial Photographs), Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism

The Grass-Cutting Sword

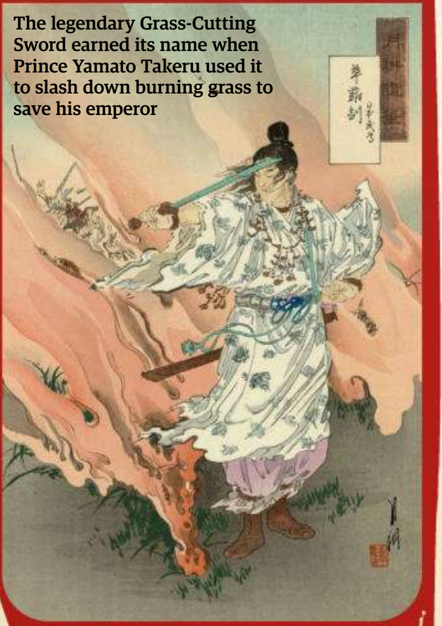
Each person who takes the Chrysanthemum Throne of Japan is presented with three legendary items

Japan's imperial regalia consists of an ancient gem, a sacred mirror, and a sword known as Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi – the Grass-Cutting Sword.

According to a legend set down in *Kojiki*, a 7th-century chronicle, this famous sword was discovered in a battle between a god and a monstrous eight-headed serpent. Once the beast was slain, Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi was found inside its tail. The sword then passed to the goddess Amaterasu, from whom all Japanese emperors are said to be descended.

The sword was once used to protect the emperor when fire spread across a field. The warrior holding it hacked down the burning grass to put out the fire and discovered with each stroke that he could control the direction of the wind.

According to one record, the original sword was lost in the Battle of Dan-no-ura when it was thrown into the sea to prevent it being captured. The sword currently used at coronations may therefore be an ancient replica. The regalia are closely guarded today so it seems unlikely whether scientific analysis will ever be done to determine the truth of the matter.



The legendary Grass-Cutting Sword earned its name when Prince Yamato Takeru used it to slash down burning grass to save his emperor

In the Japanese account of her life, we are told that a "seven-branched" sword was presented to Empress Jingū as part of the tribute. Intriguingly, a sword with seven branches off the main blade still exists today. Held in the Isonokami Shrine in Nara prefecture, its Chinese inscription says: "Never before has there been such a blade. The crown prince of the king of Baekje, who lives under august sounds, had this sword made for King of Wa in the hope that it might be passed on to later generations." Baekje was a kingdom in Korea and this sword, along with the legend of Jingū, may tell us much about the relationship between Japan and Korea in antiquity.

UNIFICATION IN THE KOFUN PERIOD

Empress Jingū is generally considered the last ruler of the Yayoi period. The Kofun period that followed is marked by the growing power of the Yamato emperors, descendants of Jingū. Their increasing power is seen in the large Kofun tombs that they were buried in, from which the period takes its name.

These graves are packed with sophisticated arms and armour. Swords have been found with glittering, gilded hilts shaped like animals from myth. Iron armour is often decorated with bronze and gold. These implements of war became necessary as the Yamato sought to increase their power and territory.

At the court in Yamato, the emperors – or Ōkimi, meaning great king, as they called themselves – ruled over a complex web of clans. Some clans were given special roles; the Otomo and Mononobe were often placed in charge of the military, while others served ritual roles or as ministers of state. Inconvenient sons who might otherwise have muddied the line of the imperial succession were sometimes given new surnames and roles, occasionally creating new clans in the process.

Thanks to clay models left as grave offerings from this period, we know that there was a highly developed cavalry that rode horses with saddles and stirrups. These Haniwa figures also show soldiers in suits of armour made from overlapping plates and armed with a sword worn at the hip. Using clan leaders to muster and command armies, the Yamato emperors were able to subjugate the southern half of Japan under their rule.

THE ARRIVAL OF BUDDHISM

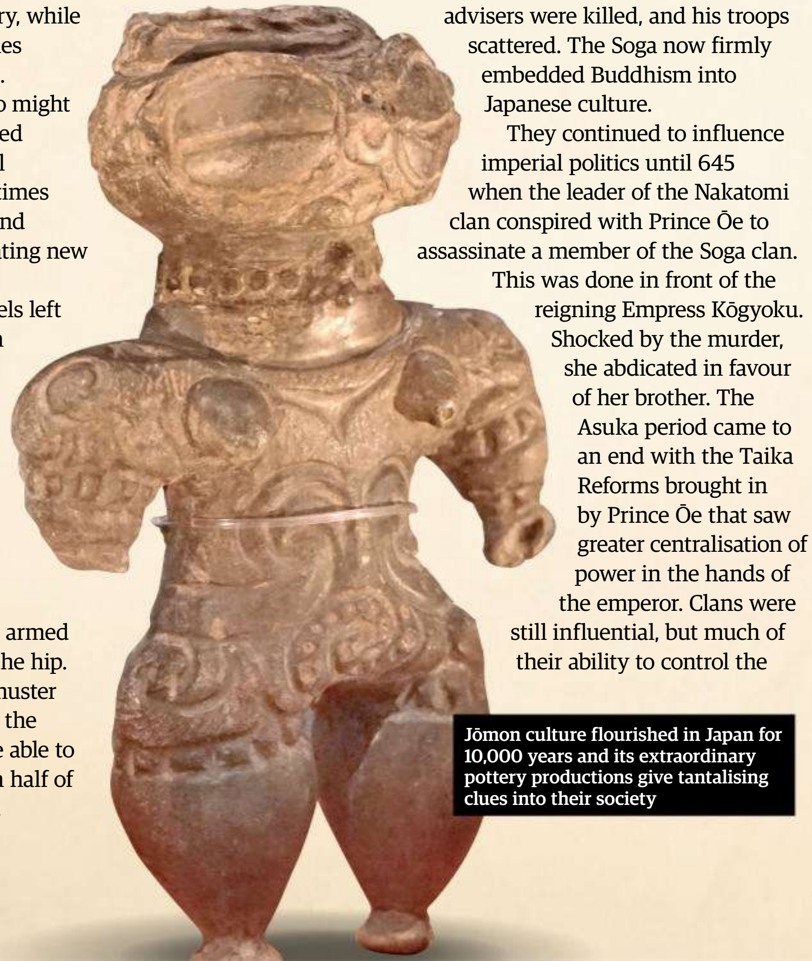
Japan continued to receive migrants from East Asia throughout the Kofun period. As well as introducing the Chinese writing system and methods of organising an imperial court, many immigrants rose to prominent positions. The incoming people were called Toraijin, and by the 9th century, nearly one-quarter of the clans in the Honshu region could trace their ancestry back to ancestors from outside Japan.

The migrants also brought with them Buddhism for the first time, marking the start of the Asuka Period. In Japanese tradition, Buddhism came to Japan when a king from Korea sent Emperor Kinmei Buddhist images and texts in 552 CE. The emperor is said to have declared: "Never have I heard of such an exquisite teaching." But while he may have been impressed, several clans were not so taken with Buddhism. The Mononobe and Nakatomi clung to the traditional teachings of Shinto, believing that Buddhism would harm the relationship with the kami spirits and thus Japan. While Buddhism was not made the official religion, the Soga clan was allowed to adopt it.

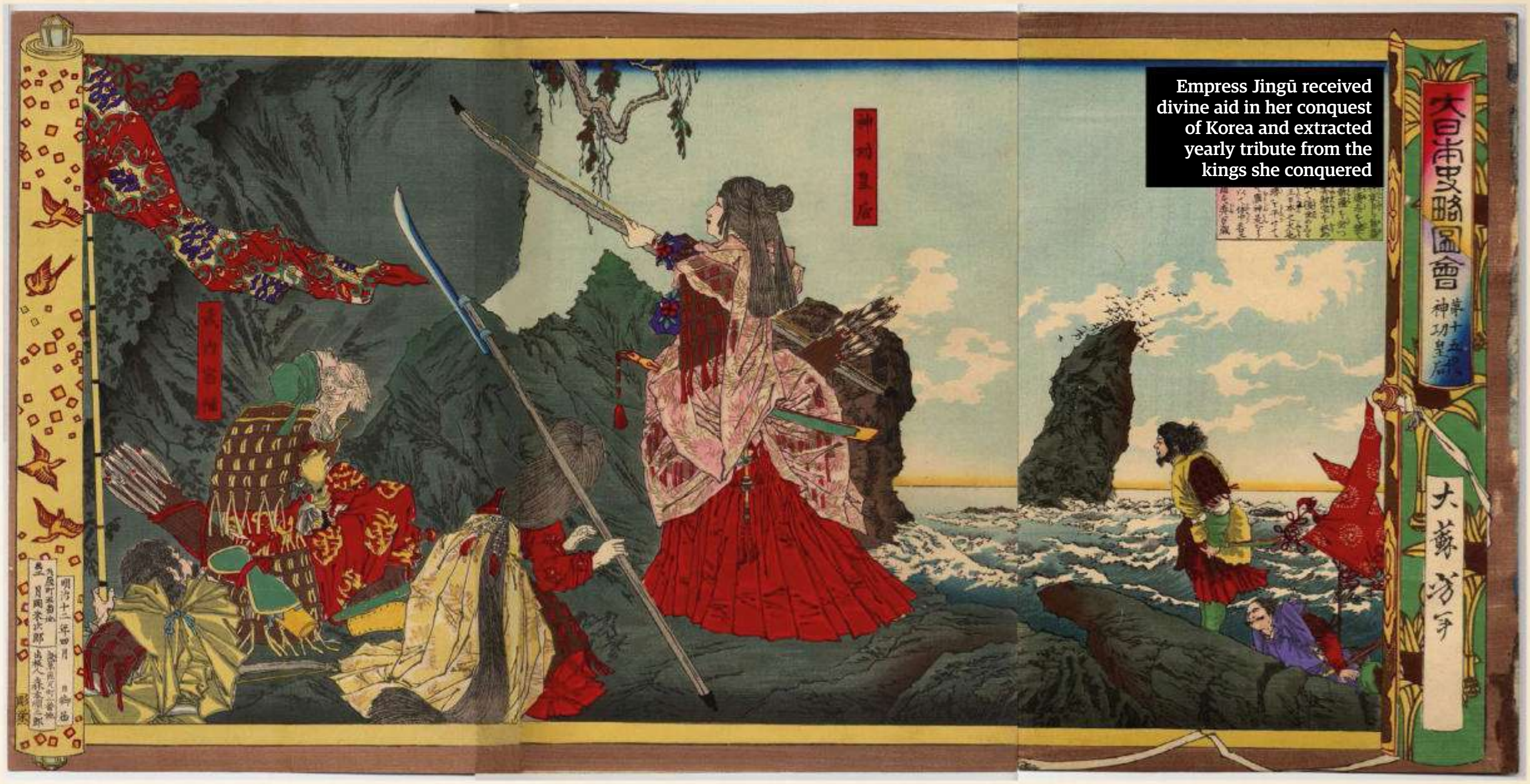
The Soga clan was influential at court and several of its members married into the imperial family. Kinmei's son, Emperor Bidatsu, married a daughter of the Soga clan as his second wife. When Bidatsu died, conflict broke out, with the Soga looking to place the emperor's younger, Soga, son on the throne.

At the Battle of Mount Shigi, the Soga triumphed. According to some, this was through divine aid when they invoked Buddhist symbols. What is known is that an arrow struck down the head of the Mononobe clan, his closest advisers were killed, and his troops scattered. The Soga now firmly embedded Buddhism into Japanese culture.

They continued to influence imperial politics until 645 when the leader of the Nakatomi clan conspired with Prince Ōe to assassinate a member of the Soga clan. This was done in front of the reigning Empress Kōgyoku. Shocked by the murder, she abdicated in favour of her brother. The Asuka period came to an end with the Taika Reforms brought in by Prince Ōe that saw greater centralisation of power in the hands of the emperor. Clans were still influential, but much of their ability to control the



Jōmon culture flourished in Japan for 10,000 years and its extraordinary pottery productions give tantalising clues into their society


大日本史略圖會
神功皇后
大蘇芳年

Empress Jingū received divine aid in her conquest of Korea and extracted yearly tribute from the kings she conquered

throne was removed, limiting their overall power in the imperial court and making it a little harder for one clan to influence the ruler

EMPRESS KŌKEN AND THE MONK DŌKYŌ

In 749 CE, an imperial princess took the throne as Empress Kōken. Her father had no direct male heir and ruled alongside her. When he died in 756, his will stated that Kōken's heir would be Prince Funado. However, Kōken was convinced by the powerful Fujiwara no Nakamaro that Funado was insufficiently loyal to the throne and that he should be replaced by Prince Oi. As soon as this was done, conspiracies sprang up not only to return Funado to the line of succession, but to remove Empress Kōken from power.

> "By the 9th century, nearly one-quarter of the clans in the Honshu region could trace their ancestry back to ancestors from outside Japan"

The conspiracy was soon uncovered and Kōken issued orders to her guards to arrest all involved. The Japanese history *Shoku Nihongi* goes into great detail about how the conspirators were captured, tortured and forced to confess. Empress Kōken issued an edict that told her subjects how the conspirators planned to kill Nakamaro, steal the seals and ritual objects of the crown, and replace her on the throne.

After the attempted coup, Nakamaro became more powerful. Vast revenues were entrusted to him as well as control of the military. In 757, Kōken abdicated the throne, apparently willingly, to Prince Oi, who became Emperor Junnin. Nakamaro remained one of the leading statesmen at court despite the change in monarch.

Kōken continued to be a power at court, but she fell ill in 761. The cure was found through Dōkyō, a Buddhist monk and son of a minor clan. Soon he was attending court with the former empress and some believed that the two had become lovers.

When Kōken recovered, she returned to court, but, in 762, she declared that the Emperor Junnin was not acting as a ruler should. She issued an edict that would make Junnin a mere figurehead while all real power resided with her Threatened by the return of Kōken and an increasingly powerful Dōkyō, Nakamaro raised a rebellion.

Nakamaro attempted to seize the insignia and seals of government as well as replacing the compliant Junnin with a stronger emperor. Forced to flee the capital, Nakamaro led his forces east, but imperial troops sent by Kōken blocked his path. When battle turned against Nakamaro he tried to escape on a boat across Lake Biwa. He was captured and, alongside his family, executed. His head was taken to decorate the palace walls.

Empress Kōken now deposed Junnin entirely and retook the throne for herself under the title Empress Shōtoku, with the loyal Dōkyō by her side. Unfortunately, there was no end to the power and wealth Dōkyō desired. In 768 a message was sent from the Uza Shrine saying that the gods wanted Dōkyō to be emperor. Shōtoku was puzzled by this divine order so she sent a messenger to confirm that this was really what the gods desired. The oracle replied:

"Since the establishment of our state, the distinction between lord and subject has been fixed. Never has there been an occasion when a subject was made lord. The throne of the Heavenly Sun Succession shall be given to one of the imperial lineage; wicked persons should immediately be swept away."

Dōkyō was seen as a grasping usurper and his hold on power began to loosen. When Empress Shōtoku died in 770, he was removed from every office he held and forced into exile in a low-ranking monastery.

THE FUJIWARA CLAN

Nakamaro was just one member of the powerful Fujiwara clan. His defeat did not lead to their destruction. Many of the clan had been opposed to his high-handed ways and refused to be drawn into his rebellion. They remained at court even when Dōkyō was in the ascendancy.

With the death of Kōken and the banishment of Dōkyō, the clan waxed ever more powerful. They came to marry into the imperial family, served as regents and governors, and chose emperors as they willed. The rise of the Samurai and professional soldiers grew under the Fujiwara as Japan moved into the Heian period.

Image source: Getty Images, Wiki

The conquest of northern Honshu

Northern Honshu was not always part of Japan; its colonisation and conquest, and the dynamic response by the Emishi even after their military defeat, had a far-reaching influence on Japanese political and military history

Written by Dr Nyri A Bakkalian

Before its annexation by the Yamato court, northern Honshu was called Michinoku: "beyond where the road ends". In the 7th century, the court's meaningful sphere of control extended as far as Shirakawa Barrier (Shirakawa no seki), a government outpost in modern-day Fukushima prefecture, for a very long time.

Shirakawa Barrier was so far from central Japan that even in later poetry, "Shirakawa Barrier" survived as a euphemism evoking distance. Beyond Shirakawa Barrier in the mountains to the north and east lived the people whom the Yamato state collectively called Emishi – barbarians. They were people who stubbornly refused to submit to the Yamato aegis.

There's some debate as to whether or not the Emishi had a state or states like the Yamato court, but from the Yamato perspective, theirs was foreign land regardless. The colonisation and conquest of northern Honshu, and the dynamic response to that conquest by the Emishi even after their military defeat, had a far-reaching influence on Japanese political and military history.

> "Colonisation, open combat, and a line of fortress-settlements pushed them north"

In the face of this military threat at and beyond its northern borders, the Yamato state steadily expanded its regional control through force. Colonisation, open combat, and a line of fortress-settlements pushed them north over the years. Yamato soldiers were posted to the region as colonists, and as a deterrent against Emishi uprising. As Suzuki Takuya notes in the book *Emishi to Tōhoku Sensō*, from 701 through the late 9th century, the number of Yamato troops rose from 6,000 to 10,000 in the year 768, before settling at around 8,000. Together with this buildup, in the 8th century Yamato state also established gold mines in Mutsu. The colonisation of Emishi land was thus lucrative.

By the late 8th century, the Yamato court's northern holdings were governed from Fort Taga

大般若波羅蜜多經卷第三百二十六　三藏法師玄奘奉詔譯
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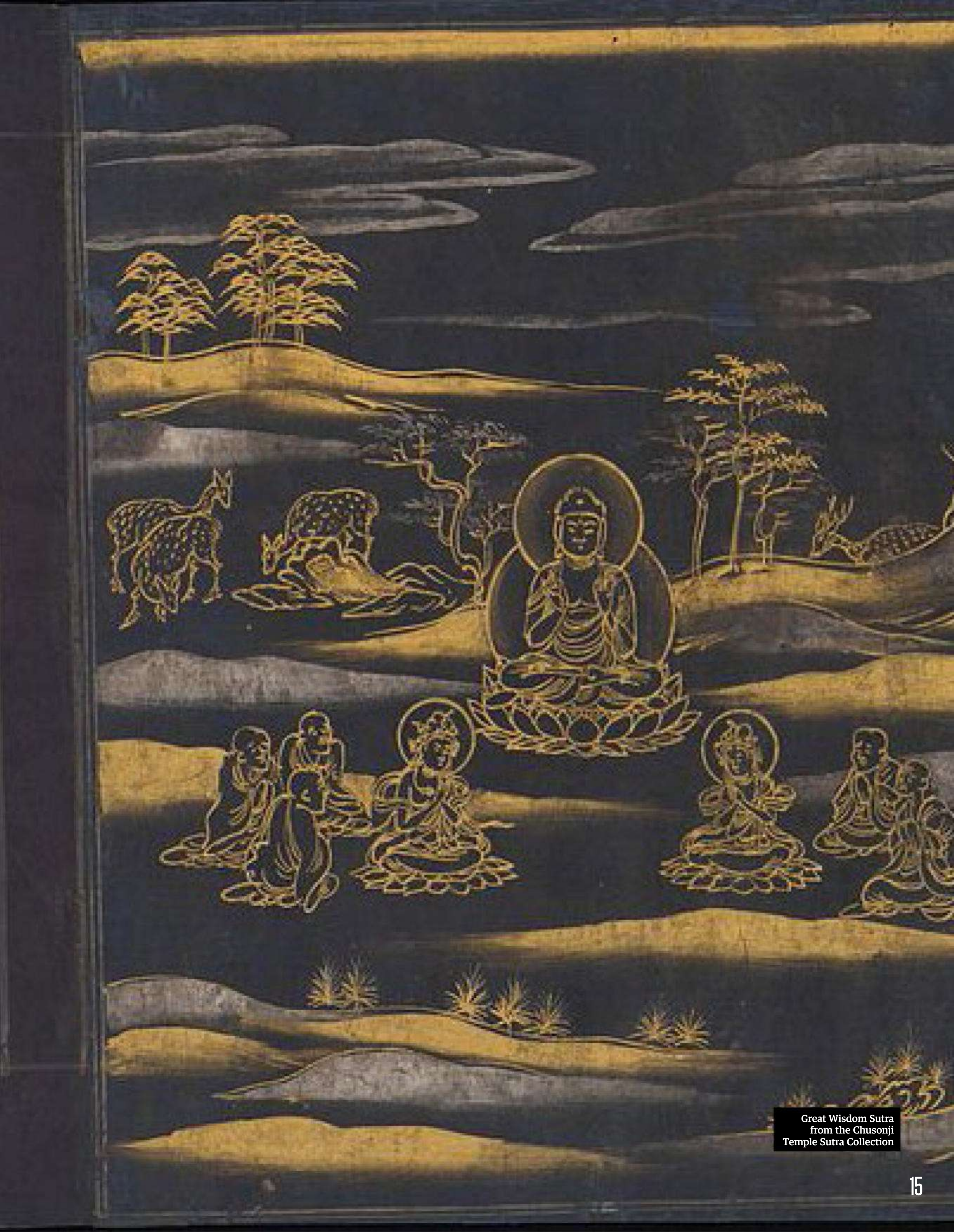


Great Wisdom Sutra
from the Chusonji
Temple Sutra Collection

A hall at Mōtsū-ji, one of the Northern Fujiwara family temples in Hiraizumi

(Tagajō), a government outpost and military installation just east of modern-day Sendai. Like other provincial capitals in the empire, Fort Taga was the seat of a civil administration. But because this was the edge of empire, it was also the headquarters for a special peacekeeping officer, the Commanding General for Pacification. Together with this, the court divided this newly annexed land into two provinces, Mutsu and Dewa, which endured in some form until the launch of the modern prefecture system in the 1870s.

But Emishi resistance to this foreign authority continued despite the presence of troops. Emishi murdered a Yamato official in 720, and launched a rebellion. The court soon dispatched a punitive expedition in response, and issued an edict ordering land cultivation, which would further bring the land in line with Yamato norms, making it easier to control.

After further revolts in Mutsu in 774, and in Dewa in 777, Emishi rebels burned Fort Taga in 780 and killed local government officials in a revolt led by one-time Yamato ally Korehari no Azamaro. Azamaro had previously led Yamato-allied Emishi troops in support of action against unsubjugated Emishi in Mutsu. Michishima Ōtate, a local Yamato-born resident, apparently taunted Azamaro for his foreign ancestry, which reportedly provoked the revolt. Azamaro's men quickly murdered both Michishima and Ki no Hirozumi, a court noble also antagonistic to Azamaro who was posted to the region. This rebellion raged for over half a year.

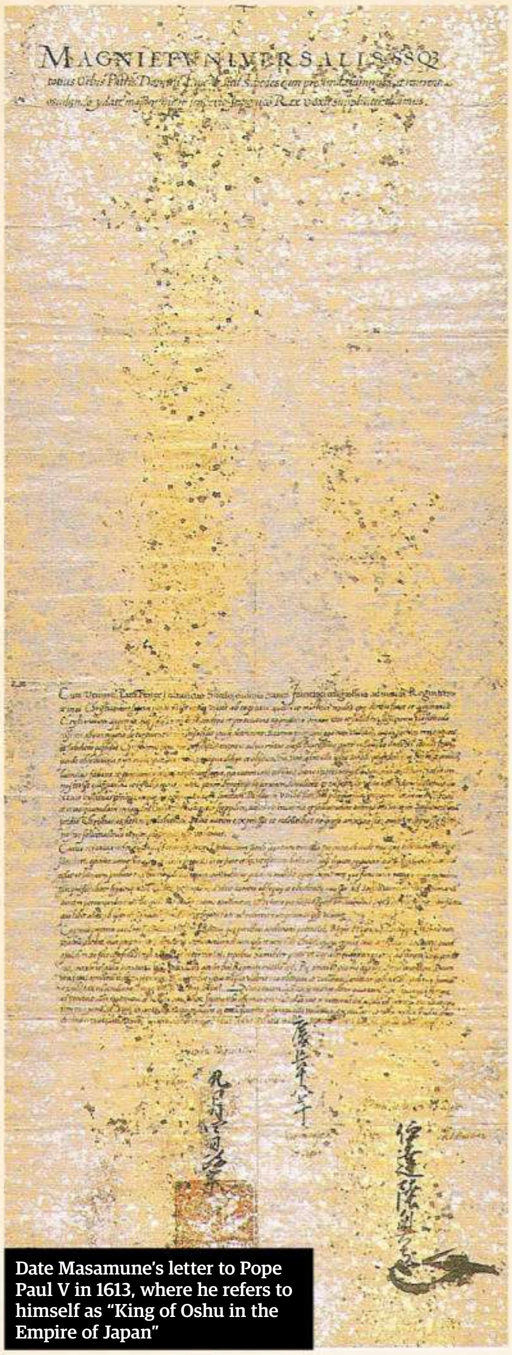
> "The fushū kept up a continuity with their non-Yamato roots, holding onto their lands"

Things only worsened for the Yamato court, culminating in the particularly large, late-8th-century Emishi rebellion led by Aterui, who lived in Isawa, one of the Inner Six Counties in what's now Iwate prefecture, where he commanded a significant following. The revolt lasted for several years, until Aterui's defeat and execution in 802.

That year, a Yamato army under Sakanoue no Tamuramaro crushed further concerted Emishi resistance. Tamuramaro is one of the first people in Japan to have received the title "barbarian-subduing generalissimo"– sei-i taishogun – at a time when this title was given to the commanders of major expeditionary forces dispatched against foreign enemies. He secured Aterui's surrender and reasserted the court's authority in the Tōhoku region.

Tamuramaro's forces further expanded political and military control by building new fortifications. They also moved the regional government's seat from Fort Taga to Fort Isawa, in what is now southern Iwate. Locally based Yamato forces soon built other, more northerly forts. Yet this didn't end the uprisings: another in 878 saw Yamato outposts in Dewa destroyed. Again, it was some time before Yamato forces were able to respond and reassert their control.

As the Yamato government, newly ensconced in Heian-kyō (modern Kyoto), strengthened and solidified its control over the north, it divided the Emishi into two groups: fushū and emishi. The fushū were the "surrendered barbarians" or "captives", Emishi who submitted to the court's authority and assimilated at least some of Yamato culture. But as historian Mimi Hall Yiengpruksawan notes, the fushū kept up a continuity with their non-Yamato roots, holding onto their lands, gods, and even their weapons for the next several centuries. They were the court's regional allies, called upon to join military campaigns and contribute government levies and projects. Leaders of major fushū families could also hold the title of "fushū chief" (fushūchō), which recognised their preeminence but also brought them at least nominally into the Yamato government's political orbit. Meanwhile, the court continued to label Emishi those northerners who did not submit, and who remained outside the court's control and the Yamato cultural sphere.



Date Masamune's letter to Pope Paul V in 1613, where he refers to himself as "King of Oshu in the Empire of Japan"

A fushū family that rose to prominence in the Heian era was the Northern Fujiwara, whose first stronghold was Tamuramaro's old Fort Isawa. This was a family of mixed Yamato-Emishi origin, which ruled from its second stronghold, Hiraizumi, for four generations.

Although it was kin to the princely Fujiwara family that frequently held political power at the Kyoto court, the Northern Fujiwara family made no secret of its Emishi heritage. Northern Fujiwara founder Fujiwara no Kiyohira (1056-1128) and his grandson Hidehira (1122-87) understood that their land lay "inside" and "outside" the empire, and took advantage of that position, maintaining connections with Kyoto while each called himself "chief of the barbarians".

The view from Kyoto held that the Northern Fujiwara were cultured, but also part barbarian. All Fujiwara lords starting with Kiyohira held some sort of court rank or office, but some in Kyoto felt that this was improper because of their Emishi heritage. Others feared the Northern Fujiwara were secretly commanders of a barbarian horde that could spill over into the rest of Japan without warning. This fear was part of what precipitated the northern military campaigns of Minamoto no Yoritomo, the first Kamakura shogun.

Regardless of their reputation in Kyoto as quasi-barbarians, the Fujiwara were wealthy thanks in part to the gold that the Yamato court had once discovered in the region, and were thus not only in a position to field fighting forces but also to be patrons of the arts and the centre of a Buddhist cultural sphere.

Theirs was a syncretic Buddhism, one that incorporated Heian-era Shinto deities as well as old Emishi deities that were still worshipped in northern Honshu. Kyoto developed its own Buddhist culture, but Hiraizumi's was different because it merged those Emishi spiritual traditions with Buddhism.

Chūson-ji and Mōtsū-ji, two of the Northern Fujiwara family's major temples, were named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2011. The temples were where pathbreaking haiku poet Matsuo Bashō visited in the 17th century and wrote his famous poem about summer grass as the last remnant of warriors' dreams.

Protected by politics, soldiering and force of the dharma, the Northern Fujiwara state and society flourished until its sudden, violent destruction in 1189, before the still greater armed might of the armies Minamoto no Yoritomo raised from the Kantō region. But northern Honshu, now known as the Tōhoku ('East-North') region, remained a politically semi-autonomous region into the late Edo period. While it is no longer the northernmost part of Japan, it does remain a significantly rural region today.

And what of the title of sei-i taishōgun once held by Tamuramaro in his campaigns against the Emishi? This title went on to far greater fame as the honorific that would be held by three successive dynasties from the 12th to the 19th century: we remember it today in its abbreviated form: shogun.

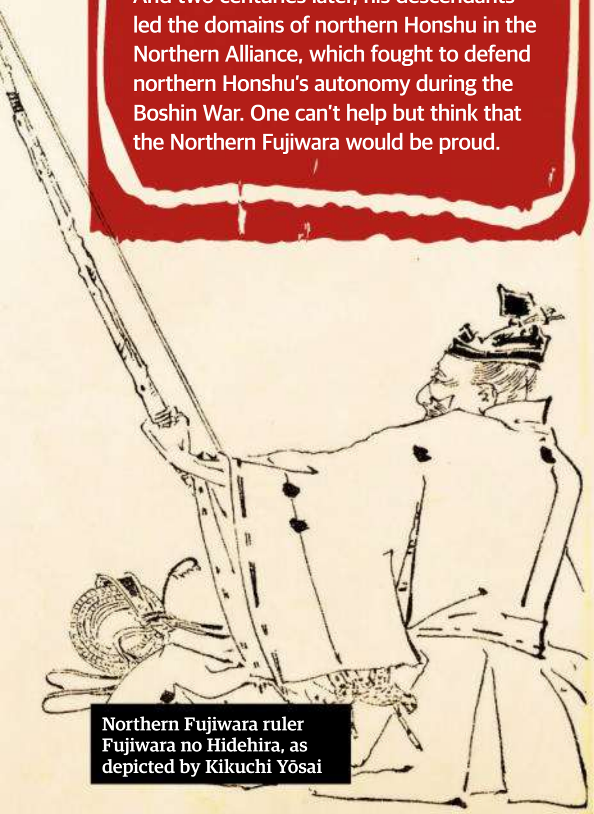
Cenotaph to Emishi leaders Aterui and more in modern Hirakata, Osaka prefecture

Northern Honshu after the Emishi

The story of northern Honshu as a semi-autonomous region not quite adhering to the rules of the rest of Japan continued well past Minamoto no Yoritomo's conquest of the Northern Fujiwara lands. Yoritomo stationed the Isawa family at Fort Taga, appointing it to the office of Mutsu Caretaker (Ōshū Rusushoku), with considerable local autonomy.

The posting of local representatives with semi-autonomous authority continued under the succeeding Ashikaga shogunate (1336-1573), with the posting of tandai, or commissioners. Finally, in the Warring States era, the House of Date made itself into the region's political centre of gravity, during the rule of its most renowned daimyo, Date Masamune (1567-1636). Masamune was like the Northern Fujiwara a patron of the arts and religion, and it's thanks to his and his descendants' efforts that many of the temples and other historic locations of the Northern Fujiwara survive to the present.

In his correspondence with European heads of state, Masamune called himself "King of Ōshū in the Empire of Japan"– that is, King of Mutsu, the former Michinoku. And two centuries later, his descendants led the domains of northern Honshu in the Northern Alliance, which fought to defend northern Honshu's autonomy during the Boshin War. One can't help but think that the Northern Fujiwara would be proud.



Northern Fujiwara ruler Fujiwara no Hidehira, as depicted by Kikuchi Yōsai

The Age of Tranquillity

The Heian period was a cultural high point of Japan, but it also saw some of the most vicious struggles for control

Written by Ben Gazur

The Heian period takes its name from the foundation of a new capital city founded by Emperor Kanmu in 794 CE. Disappointed by the rivalries and strife that had beset the Nara Period, the emperor decided that a new capital built on a Chinese model would bring stability. He also hoped that the absolute rule of the Chinese emperors could be emulated in Japan.

Heian-kyō - the "Capital of Peace and Tranquillity" - was set out in a grid pattern to further underscore the order Emperor Kanmu hoped to create. Better known today as Kyoto, this city would be the capital of Japan for 1,000 years. Despite the flourishing of Japanese culture during the Heian period, however, the hopes for peace and tranquillity were never quite achieved.

A NEW COURT

The new capital at Heian-kyō was a city of wide avenues and gorgeous buildings of red columns supporting green roof tiles. A palace complex was constructed to house both the personal living quarters of the imperial family and the administration buildings of the government. The palace was designed to be the centre of imperial power and a place where the struggles between nobles could be restrained. The strife caused by Buddhism was also excluded by having no Buddhist temples within the main area of the capital.

The physical construction of the new capital was matched by centralisation of the government of all Japan. While Emperor Kanmu ruled much of what is now Japan, there were still the Emishi people of the northern regions who were not under his direct control.

A Japanese text from the time describes how the Emishi were seen by those living in the capital. "In winter, they dwell in holes; in summer, they live in nests. Their clothing consists of furs, and they drink blood." Raids by both sides across the frontier presented a continued threat. The court's response was to push further into Emishi territory and construct forts to project their power. This was not a peaceful process.

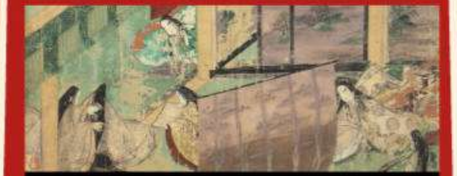
The 38 Years' War against the Emishi had begun before Kanmu came to the throne. In 773, hostilities began with the Emishi rising up and destroying many of the Japanese fortresses in the region. The emperor of the time raised large national armies and sent them against the Emishi to limited success. Though the Japanese forces numbered in the tens of thousands, small bands of Emishi fighters were able to harry them and bring them to battle in unfavourable areas.

> "Small bands of Emeshi fighters were able to harry them and bring them to battle"

In the Battle of Koromo River in 789, 1,000 Emishi under the command of General Aterui beat a far more numerous Japanese force. Many Japanese warriors were drowned when they tried to flee. One Japanese general said: "Horse-and-bow warfare is learned from birth by the barbarians. Ten of our subjects cannot equal one of them." It became recognised that the National Army was no longer fit for modern warfare.

Any Japanese male aged 20 to 59 could be conscripted into the national army as needed. A man would lay down his spade on the farm one day and pick up a pike the next. Around one month of every year was spent in service of the army. Putting down banditry was one of the army's main functions, but the service was open for abuse with some governors putting their conscripts to work on private farms. Nonetheless,

Ladies of the court



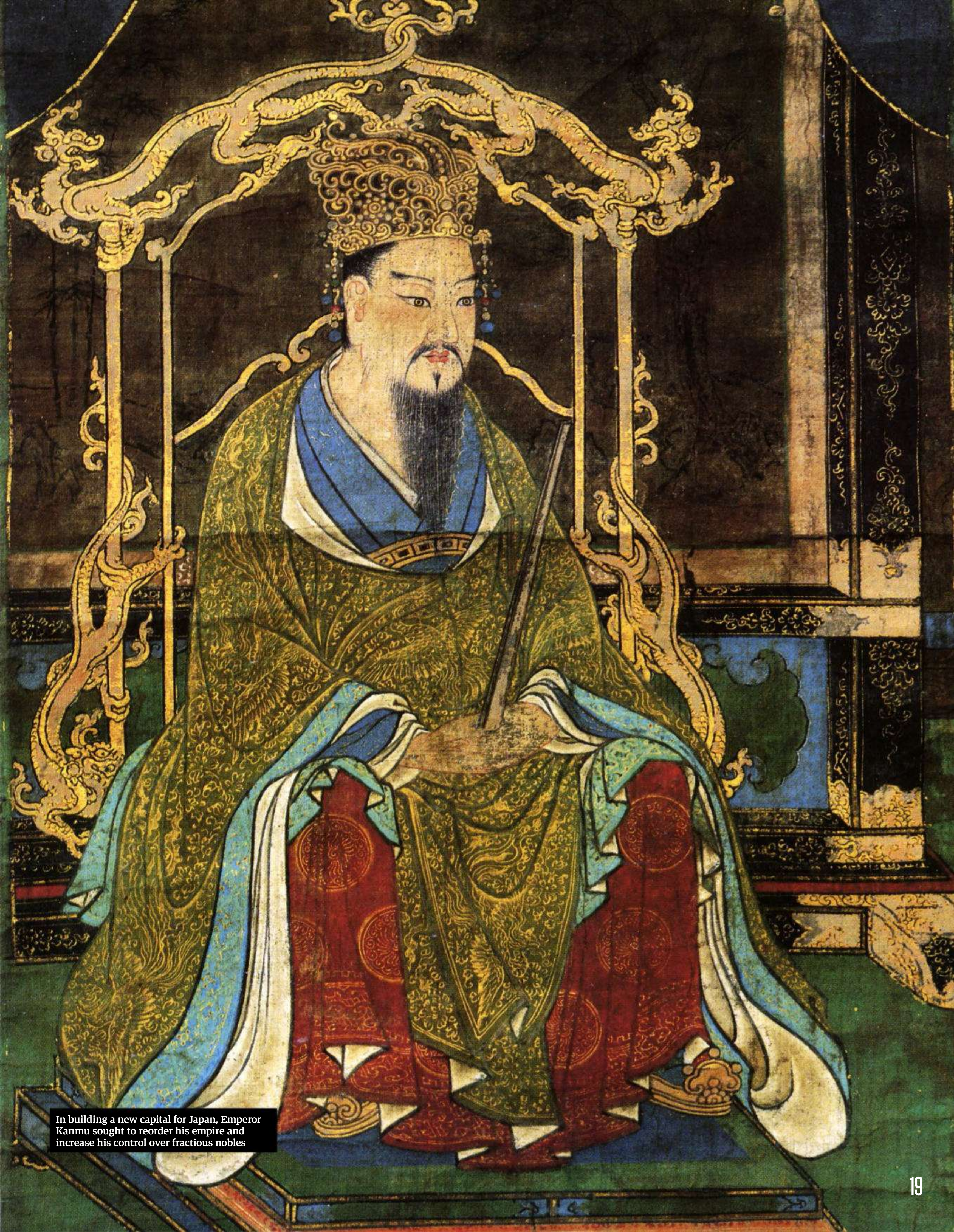
The Tale of Genji vividly illustrates what life was like behind the scenes at the imperial court, especially for the women

The outstanding artistic output of the Heian period is perhaps best exemplified in the female writers of the time. While most women were barred from official positions at court, many wealthy families gave their daughters an extensive education. With the development of written Japanese, many ladies began to pen their own works.

The Tale of Genji was written in the early 11th century by Murasaki Shikibu and many consider it to be one of the first great novels in all of literature. The tale follows a minor son of a Japanese emperor and his pursuit of a career, and it gives an intimate portrait of life at the Heian court.

Other writers penned zuihitsu, collections of essays and vignettes, that give a flavour of how court women lived at the time. In Sei Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book*, a lady-in-waiting to Empress Sadako records her thoughts in witty and amusing sections, and reveals the network of love affairs that riddled the court.

With writing being one of the few outlets for female creativity, it could spark rivalries. Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon served different empresses and sought to be the most famous writer of their day.



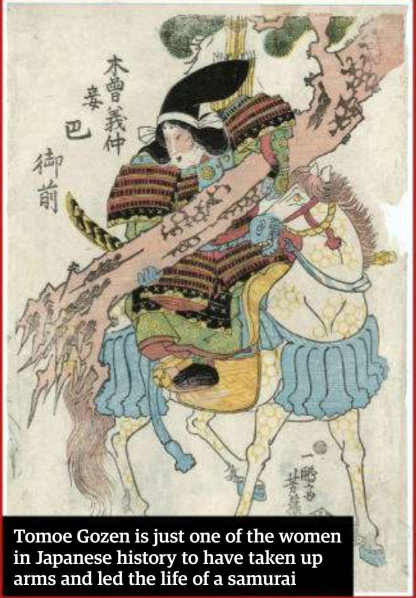
In building a new capital for Japan, Emperor Kanmu sought to reorder his empire and increase his control over fractious nobles

Tomoe Gozen: A female samurai

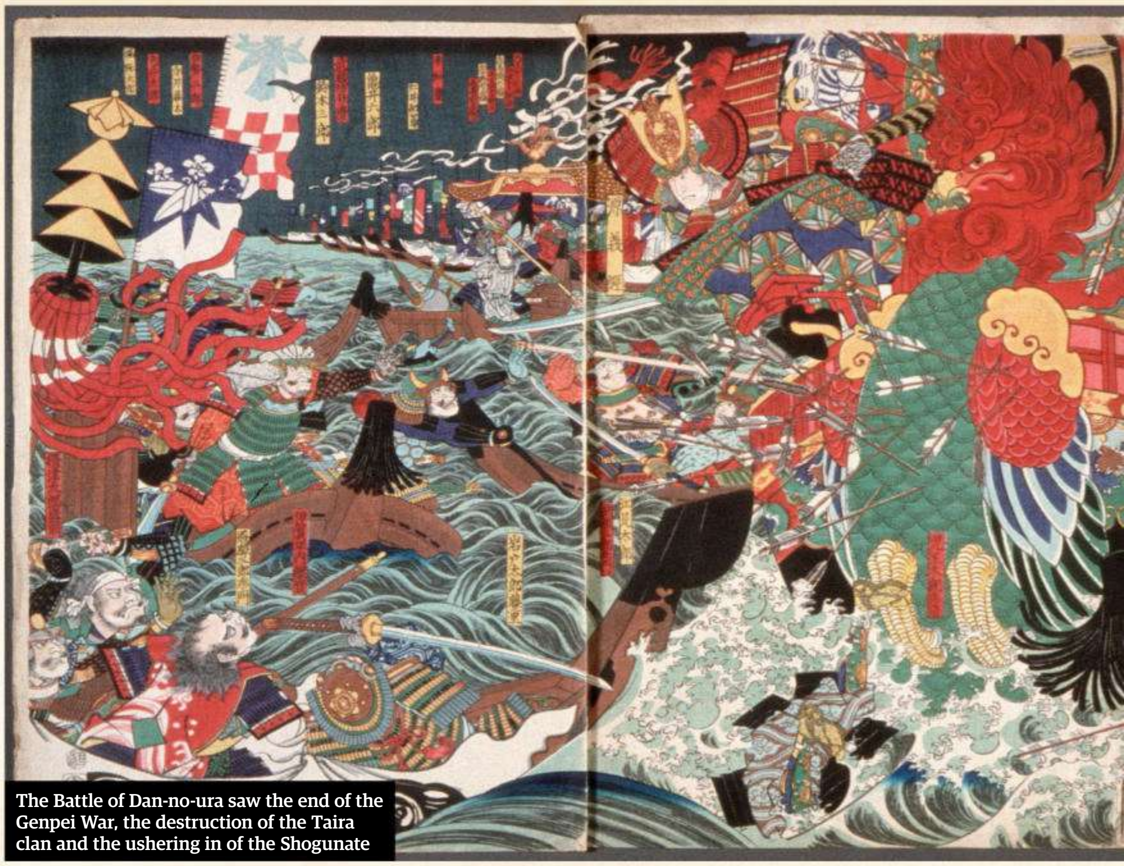
The samurai are generally depicted as warrior men, but there were examples of onna-bugeisha – warrior women. Many women from samurai families were trained in the use of weapons to help protect their families and homes in times of war, but some were also used on the battlefield.

In a 13th-century account of the Ganpei War, we are told of Tomoe Gozen, the female companion of Minamoto no Yoshinaka. "She was a remarkably strong archer, and as a swords-woman she was a warrior worth a thousand, ready to confront a demon or a god, mounted or on foot." When it came to the battles of the war, she was not simply a soldier. "Yoshinaka sent her out as his first captain… and she performed more deeds of valour than any of his other warriors."

Most onna-bugeisha were armed with a naginata, a pole tipped with a curved blade, but Tomoe Gozen was fitted out with the full kit of the samurai. One enemy leader attempted to drag her from her horse; Gozen decapitated him with her sword and delivered his head to Yoshinaka. Some historians have questioned whether Gozen was a real person, but her story has lived on and inspired generations of samurai.



Tomoe Gozen is just one of the women in Japanese history to have taken up arms and led the life of a samurai



The Battle of Dan-no-ura saw the end of the Genpei War, the destruction of the Taira clan and the ushering in of the Shogunate

against the quick-moving Emishi, these peasant soldiers were no match.

In a move that would have wide repercussions, Emperor Kanmu dissolved the National Army in 792. Forces would now be raised by local rulers, removing the expense of the army from the imperial throne. But it also loosened the emperor's grip on the warrior class.

The Emishi War ended in 811 with a nominal Japanese victory, but the Emishi of the northern areas remained independent. The real victory was for those who could afford to train as warriors. Suddenly being a trained warrior was a welcoming career opportunity for many noblemen. With limited official offices at the new court, and most of them in the hands of the Fujiwara clan, the ability to fight offered a path to influence. Service to an important lord was one of the only methods of movement up the social ladder. 'Bushi' was the name for any warrior, but those in service to a lord were called samurai.

> "For the next 170 years, every emperor was born to a Fujiwara mother"

A NEW ORDER

The Heian period saw a flourishing of Japanese culture. The design of the new capital had been made to resemble a Chinese imperial city, but the era saw a diminished Chinese influence. Diplomatic relationships with China ended after 838 CE as Japan no longer sought conquest abroad. Some trade continued and many Japanese scholars travelled in China to learn administration, but there were new routes to success in the court.

Thousands of Chinese texts made their way to Japan, but Japan began to develop a unique literature of its own. A form of Japanese writing developed that used Chinese characters to write out Japanese phonetically. From this, a true Japanese literature emerged. Works like *The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book* offer the best insight into what life was like at the Heian court, and despite Emperor Kanmu's best efforts, the court remained a place of squabbles between high-ranking families and clans.

The pre-eminent family of the time was the Fujiwara. In past centuries, when a child ascended the throne, another member of the imperial family was chosen to act as their regent. This changed in 858 when Fujiwara no Yoshifusa was appointed sesshō (regent) for the young Emperor Seiwa. He was chosen because one of his daughters was consort to the previous emperor and he was grandfather to Seiwa. For the next 170 years, every emperor was born to a Fujiwara mother.

八島檀之浦合戰
義經八艘飛之圖

With the Fujiwara wielding so much power at court, many families felt shut out of imperial life. The Taira and Minamoto clans in particular had to find new ways of exerting influence. These two families were born out of a process known as Dynastic Shedding.

Even the large new palace and capital couldn't house all members of the imperial family; if an emperor found that he had too many sons, he could make them commoners by giving them surnames like Taira or Minamoto to ease the burden on the throne. By removing members of the imperial family in this way, the throne was secured for the emperor's chosen successor by removing potential rivals. The Taira clan could trace its origin to the younger sons of Emperor Kenmu, and later emperors. The abolition of the National Army offered a new path to these noble but unwanted children.

But the need for soldiers did not end just because the National Army was dissolved. Governors still required armed men to protect their lands from bandits. Tax collectors still needed protection from those who resented their presence. More and more, the court came to require warriors to put down rebellions.

When Taira no Masakado failed to find a career in court, he returned to his province in Shimōsa. There he became involved in political unrest and in 939 he raised a rebellion. Masakado conquered much of the Kanto region of Japan and declared himself Shinnō – The New Emperor. At the same time, Fujiwara no Sumitomo led pirate raids in the Inland Sea. These warlords required putting down, but without an army of his own, the old emperor had to rely on other warlords to quell the revolts.

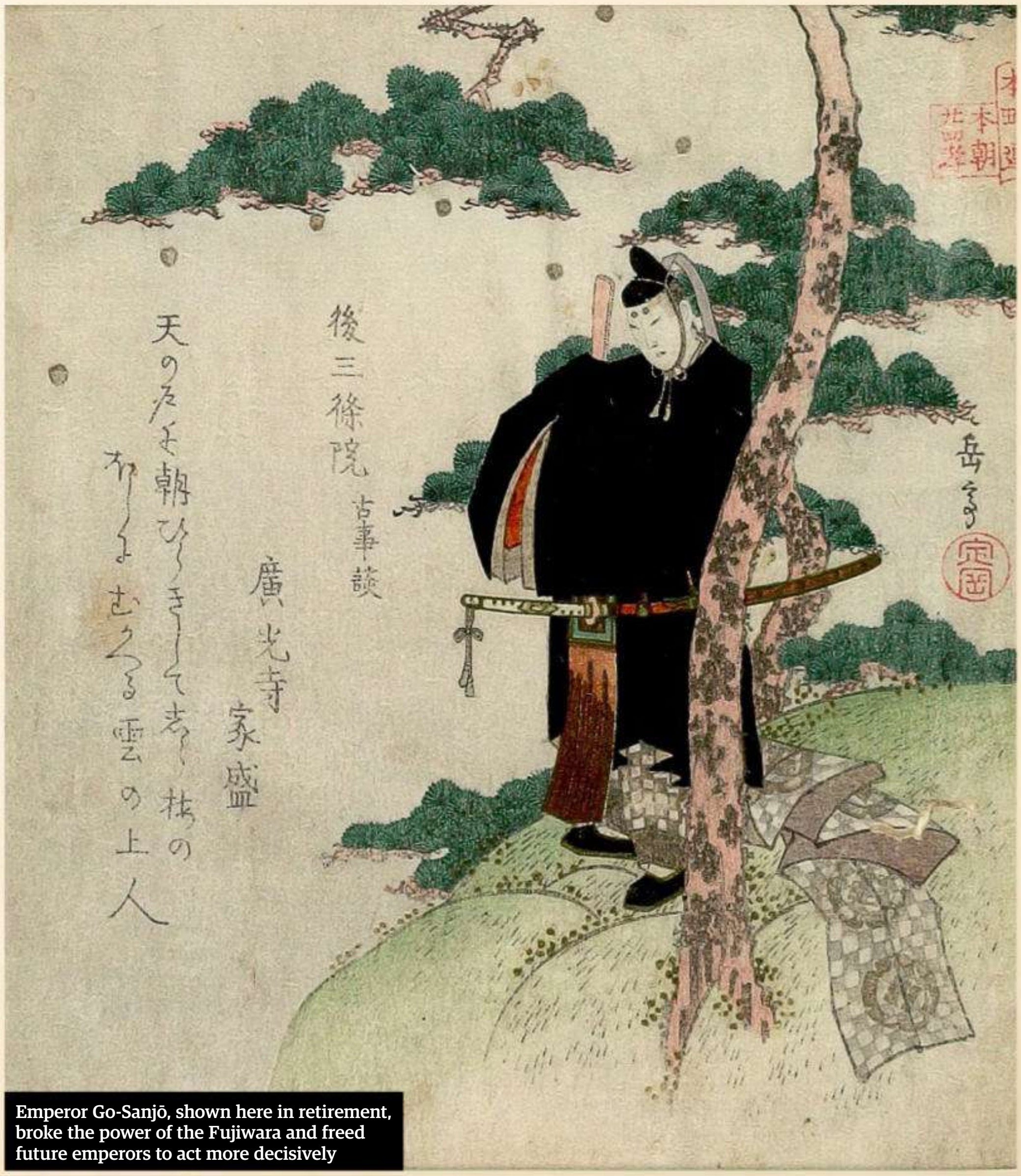
The rebellions of Taira no Masakado and Fujiwara no Sumitomo were both put down with the aid of powerful lords. They revealed, though, that divisions between and within the clans were a serious threat to the throne. Members of the Taira and Minamoto could be found on both sides, and members of the Fujiwara who did not have a position or close blood ties to those at court could rise up. One way emperors sought to buy the loyalty of noble families was to grant them lands, but this was at best a short-sighted policy.

THE GREAT ESTATES

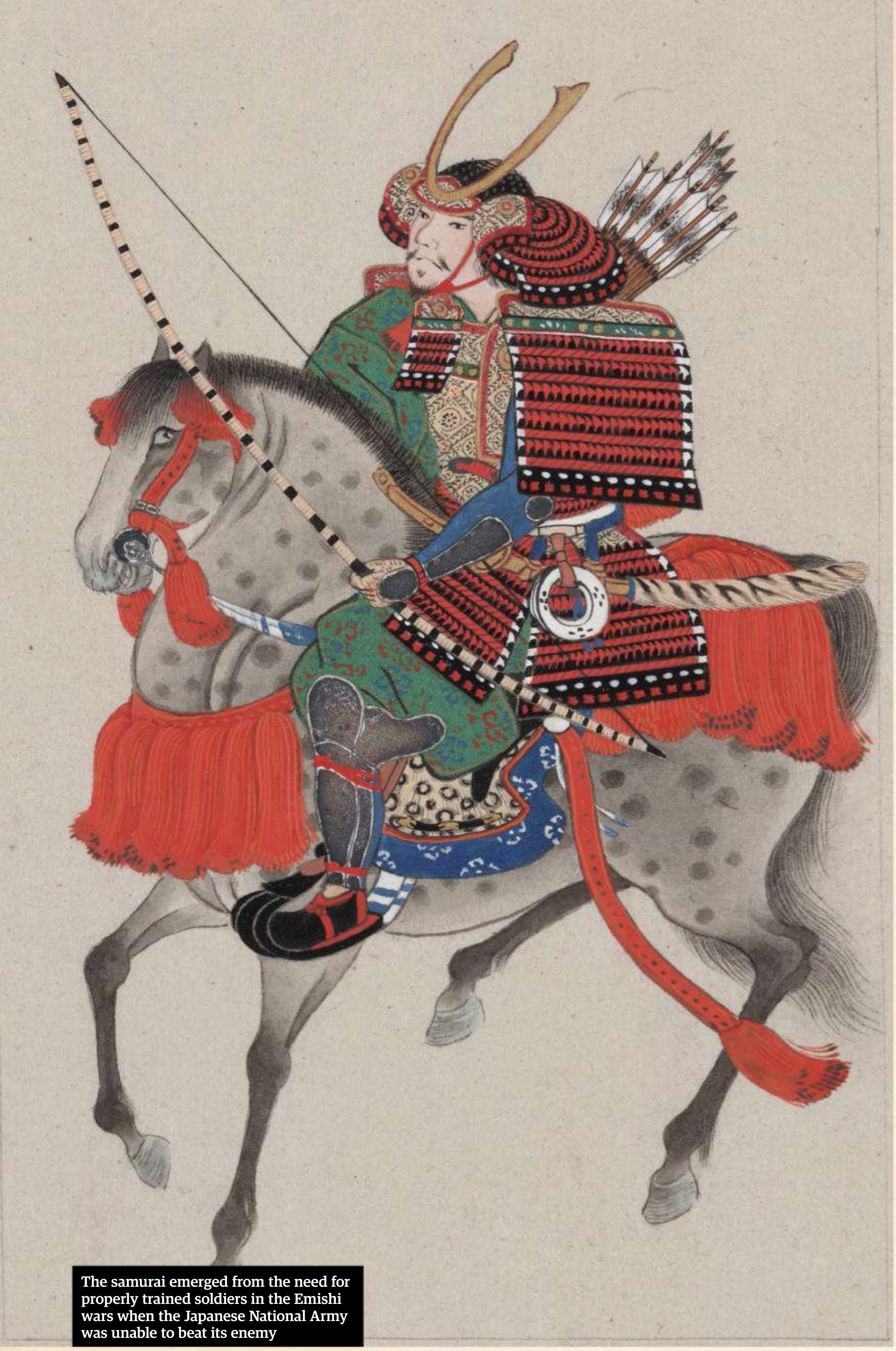
The population of Japan boomed in the Nara and Heian periods. Famine was a constant threat because of the small area of the country that was viable as farmland. But there was no incentive for farmers to clear wasteland and grow crops on it as any land they cleared could be claimed by the government. This changed in 723 when a law was issued that gave reclaimed land for three generations to the family who cultivated it. Later the grants were made perpetual. Suddenly wealthy families had an interest in clearing land to claim it for their own.

Great land estates were created in this way, but another system employed by the court ensured the loyalty of nobles. Land grants called shōen were made, turning over portions of the country to nobles and giving them power within their properties. Inside the shōen the government had no right to collect taxes, but the landowner could.

By the 10th century, nearly half of the land was in the hands of private estates. These estates needed to be guarded and the owners turned to the samurai to protect their lands. The samurai warrior could expect to be paid in koku; one koku was the amount of rice it took to feed one man for a whole year – around 180 litres.



Emperor Go-Sanjō, shown here in retirement, broke the power of the Fujiwara and freed future emperors to act more decisively



The samurai emerged from the need for properly trained soldiers in the Emishi wars when the Japanese National Army was unable to beat its enemy

Shōen owners were powerful in their own domains. While there was a brass standard box held at the treasury that wooden payment boxes were supposed to be modelled on, in some shōen, owners used two different boxes. A larger one was used to measure out payments to the owners, while they used a smaller one to measure out their payments to others.

While land grants were distributed across the country, many magnates who owned the land spent most of their time in the capital to be near the court. Many areas were left to subordinates who could exploit the absence of their lord for personal enrichment. Samurai became important and powerful people in this power vacuum.

The shōen may have helped in the short term to buy loyalty, but they created more problems. As more shōen were granted, there was a decrease in the amount of imperial tax revenue and a reduction in the money the emperor could grant to courtiers. This led to courtiers wanting shōen of their own to support their station, which led to further decreases in tax revenue and more weakening of imperial power.

Families and factions also competed for the best and most productive lands. The Fujiwara family in particular was good at gaining territory for itself. One courtier lamented: "All the land in the country belongs to the regent's house. There is not even enough public land left to stand upon." Land was power because with more land, a lord could support more samurai. The power of the overmighty Fujiwara was finally checked, however, in the 11th century.

BREAKING THE FUJIWARA

At times during the Heian period, members of the Fujiwara were the de facto rulers of Japan. Emperors were invariably provided with a Fujiwara bride, and every emperor that came to the throne had a Fujiwara mother. When a child was seated on the throne, it was a Fujiwara who became sesshō, or regent. When the emperor grew up, the regent was often given the title of kampaku (chief advisor) and carried on ruling as before. Some Fujiwara regents deposed emperors who were still only in their thirties to ensure that they could have greater influence over the next to sit on the throne.

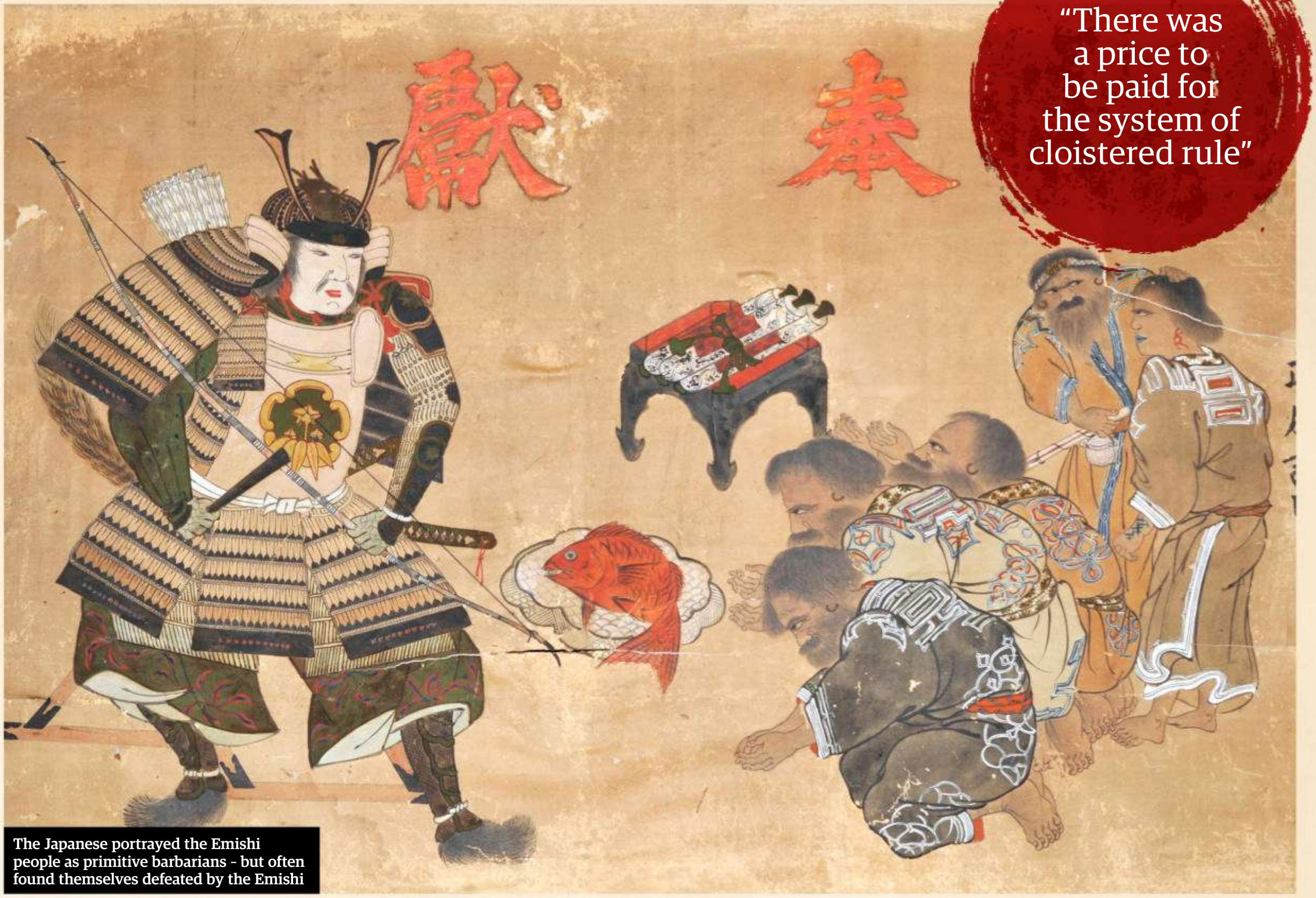
One Fujiwara, Fujiwara no Yorimichi, served as regent and kampaku for over 50 years through the reigns of three emperors. The last of these, Emperor Go-Reizei, had a Fujiwara mother and wife, but produced no male heirs. When Go-Reizei came to the throne, his half-brother Go-Sanjō was appointed as his heir. When he came to the throne after the death of his half-brother, Go-Sanjō was the first emperor in 170 years not to have had a Fujiwara mother.

While he was crown prince, Yorimichi was antagonistic towards the future emperor. He even refused him a sword traditionally given to the crown prince by claiming it only went to those of Fujiwara blood. Yorimichi is also said to have stopped Go-Reizei from abdicating, leading to Go-Sanjō being crown prince for 24 years.

When Go-Sanjō finally came to the throne, Yorimichi resigned as kampaku and was replaced by his brother Norimichi. Norimichi was sidelined by the emperor and the grip of the Fujiwara on power was reduced. Go-Sanjō filled his Private Office with scholars who had no ties of loyalty to the Fujiwara. Members of the Minamoto clan were appointed to high office. And although Go-Sanjō had a Fujiwara first wife, he did not name their son as his heir, instead waiting to see if he could produce a non-Fujiwara son with his second wife.

To further increase the power of the imperial throne, Emperor Go-Sanjō attempted to rein in the abuse of shōen. He declared all those granted since the accession of his predecessor were illegal and should be taken back into public hands. Any shōen that was a "hindrance" to the orderly running of the state was also liable to confiscation.

Minamoto officers were placed into the new Records Office that was charged with checking the paperwork for shōen and deciding whether they were legally granted or not. The land holdings of the Fujiwara, especially those in the family that had run the court, were diminished by the edicts of



The Japanese portrayed the Emishi people as primitive barbarians - but often found themselves defeated by the Emishi

“There was a price to be paid for the system of cloistered rule”

Go-Sanjō. This was partly because Yorimichi had been foolish enough to accept shōen lands simply by verbal agreement - leaving him with no records to protect his rights.

After just four years on the throne, Go-Sanjō abdicated in favour of his son., ensuring there could be no Fujiwara-chosen replacement. He would also be able rule alongside his son to make sure that he was not governed by the Fujiwara.

This was the beginning of cloistered rule - or insei - in the imperial system. Retired emperors would typically go to monasteries, but in reality they remained closely linked to the court. Go-Sanjō’s son and successor Emperor Shirakawa followed his father’s example and abdicated while young, but for the next four decades exerted powerful influence over his own son’s reign.

The retired emperor had many advantages. He could remove himself from the intrigue of court and seek advice from hand-picked advisers. He was also freed from the complex ceremonies that were bound up with the throne.

There was a price to be paid for the system of cloistered rule, though. Power flowed away from the sitting emperor while the edicts of the retired emperor were of dubious legal authority. Sometimes a rapid turnover of rulers could leave several retired emperors all seeking to control the throne at the same time. Regional powers gained mastery of their own lands while the court was in conflict with itself.

THE COMING OF THE SHOGUNATE

Cloistered rule helped to bring about the end of the Heian period. In 1156, the retired Emperor Sutoku quarrelled with the reigning Emperor Go-Shirakawa over the imperial succession. Forces of Samurai from the Taira and Minamoto clans were called into the capital by both sides, but Go-Shirakawa emerged victorious. Sutoku was exiled and the last vestiges of Fujiwara power were finally destroyed. From then on, the Taira and Minamoto were the ones whose support an emperor would lean on.

Minamoto no Yoshitomo had led the winning forces, even killing his own father who was fighting on the opposite side, but it was Taira no Kiyomori who was rewarded with a powerful position at court by the Emperor. This led to a rivalry between the two. In 1159, Kiyomori left the capital for a pilgrimage. Yoshimoto rose up in rebellion, burned the palace, and captured the emperor. Kiyomori returned with an army of Samurai and freed the emperor.

The Genpei War of 1180-85 followed Taira no Kiyomori attempting to seat his grandson Antoku on the throne. The Minamoto clan rose in support of a rival claimant. After years of warfare, the Taira were driven from the capital, and they took their child emperor with them. The end of the civil war was at the naval Battle of Dan-no-ura. The Taira were utterly defeated. To save Antoku from capture, he was drowned by his grandmother. The Minamoto clan placed their chosen emperor on the throne.

Minamoto no Yoritomo, leader of his clan in the Genpei War, was give broad powers. He had control of taxation, the power to appoint ministers at every level, and was given the title ei-i Taishōgun. This was start of the shogunate that ruled from the city of Kamakura. As military dictator, Minamoto no Yoritomo ruled directly while the emperors in Heian-kyō became mere figureheads. Coming to power thanks to the actions of his Samurai, there was now no illusion about where true power lay in Japan - it was on the edge of a samurai’s blade.

Taira Masakado
The first samurai

Among the samurai, there were none like the first, Taira Masakado, whose premature rebellion brought the imperial court to its knees

Written by Hareth Al Bustani

A shadow emerges from the flames, atop a horse. Digging his feet into the stirrups, he burns like a crazed dragon, over the corpses of his enemies and their houses. Before long, all of Japan will know the name of Taira Masakado, the greatest warrior in the realm, a New Emperor for a new era. And all of this could have been avoided.

Masakado was born in 903 CE, a great-grandson of Emperor Kammu, and a member of the powerful Taira clan. To ease the royal coffers, his grandfather, Prince Takamochi, renounced his royal lineage and settled in the eastern Kantō plain – the fertile lowland surrounding modern Tokyo – where his sons rapidly became powerful landowners. While the state had once held a monopoly on land, now most was privately owned – by temples, shrines, individuals and local clans.

Due to high imperial taxes, most peasants preferred to work for private landowners – who, with property disputes on the rise, armed them with spears and taught them archery, hunting and horse riding. Among the new class of private landowners were absent noblemen, living the high life in the capital of Heian, or modern Kyoto, retired governors who had settled in their former postings, and local clans with historic roots to their land. To make up for a lack of soft power, clans trained their peasants with exceptional bravado, promising to protect them at all costs, in return for absolute loyalty.

Before the samurai code of bushido – the way of the warrior – Japan referred to warfare as kyuba no michi, 'the way of the horse and bow' or kyusen no michi, 'the way of the bow and arrow'. Armies were centred around a core of mounted archers, drawn from prominent families, who maintained their own horses and equipment. They wore scaled armour, and though they carried swords, hand-to-hand combat was reserved for the peasants, armed with spears and shields. Local clan leaders could boast up to 500 peasants, giving special privileges to blood relatives and those whose families had served for generations. Before long, the country's mass of soldiers was concentrated in the hands of distant landowners, rather than the emperor. Despite this changing order, Masakado was raised to appreciate the prestige of imperial life. Boasting

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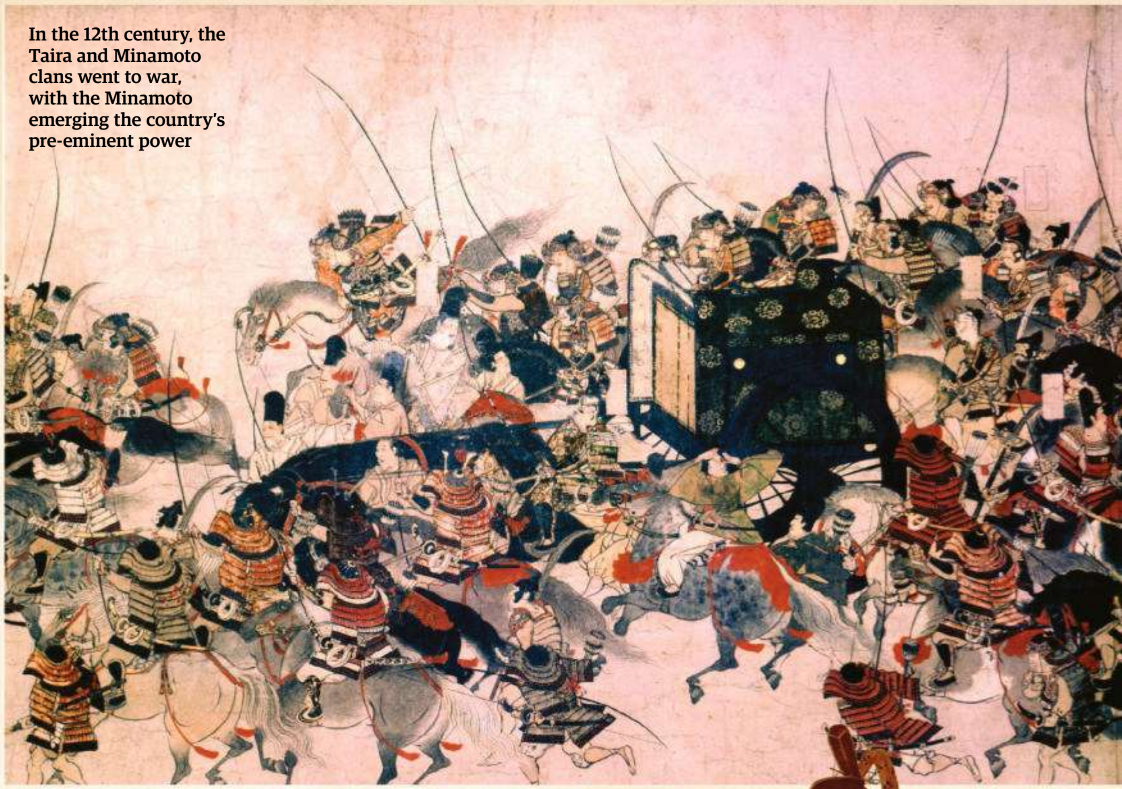
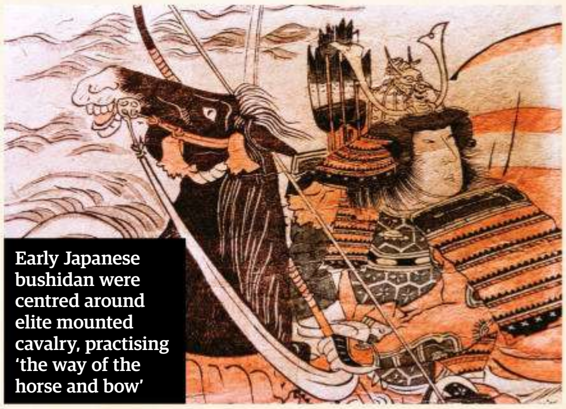
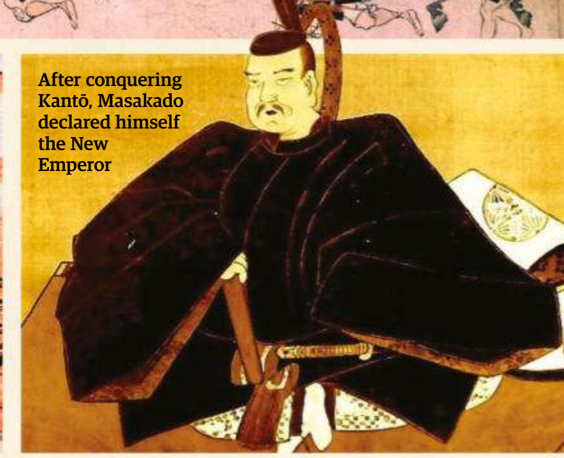


In the 12th century, the Taira and Minamoto clans went to war, with the Minamoto emerging the country's pre-eminent power



Early Japanese bushidan were centred around elite mounted cavalry, practising 'the way of the horse and bow'



After conquering Kantō, Masakado declared himself the New Emperor

an honourable lineage, he spent his youth in the capital, a guard at the emperor's private residence, and even serving the future imperial reagent, Fujiwara Tadahira. However, in spite of his immense promise, the young man failed to secure a good post. In 931 he decided to return to his homeland of Kantō – which had become a snake pit in his absence. With his father recently deceased, his uncles were keen to secure his land for themselves. Things came to a head when Masakado married his cousin against her father, Yoshikane's, wishes.

Sensing an opportunity, the powerful local landlord, Minamoto Mamoru, who had marriage ties to all of Masakado's uncles, sent his three sons to ambush him in the province of Hitachi in 935. Despite the element of surprise, they not only lost the battle, but their lives. Enraged by this unprovoked attack, Masakado rampaged across their lands, burning down their residences and the houses of hundreds of their supporters. Among the battle-dead was another of Masakado's powerful Taira uncles, Kunika. Though his death prompted his son, Sadamori, to return home from the capital, he lamented "Masakado is not my original foe". Sadamori had always been fond of his cousin – as fellow courtiers, they shared similar ambitions, and he had hoped to avoid conflict with him at all costs; perhaps even to ally with him.

In June 936, still bearing a grudge against his nephew, Yoshikane marched an army "as numerous as the clouds" to a fort in the southeastern district of Kazusa, linking up with his brother Yoshimasa. Senior clan leaders, they coerced Sadamori into joining their cause, leading a fresh-faced army of thousands, all clad in brand new armour and equipment, atop well-fed horses to Hitachi. There, Masakado lay in wait with a few hundred, poorly-equipped mounted soldiers and the 1,000-odd peasants he was able to muster. Against all odds, Masakado routed the attackers, chasing Yoshikane to the provincial government headquarters in Shimotsuke. However, keen to avoid the scandal of killing a family member, he let his uncle go unscathed – instead reporting the unprovoked attack to the imperial government and his neighbours.

Months later, Masakado was summoned to the court, where he was handed a light punishment for arson – before being pardoned as a part of a general amnesty on New Year's Day in 937, when Emperor Suzaku came of age. Although he disavowed the life of war, no sooner had he returned home, the bitter Yoshikane launched another attack at the River Kogai. During the battle, he had his army raise images of Masakado's father and grandfather, supposedly to seek their protection, but most likely to deter his enemy

Rise of the samurai

Masakado's uprising marked the rise of the samurai warrior class

After Taira Masakado's death, members of the Minamoto and Taira clans – both stemming from the imperial family – continued to amass power. In 1028, another powerful Taira chieftain, Tadatsune, resigned as vice-governor of Kazusa and broke out in revolt, causing even more damage to the country than Masakado had – before surrendering to the powerful Minamoto Yorinobu, to whom the imperial court had appealed twice.

The Minamoto clan went on to play a crucial role in quashing the Early Nine Years War, defeating the rebellious Abe clan to the north, and again in the Three Years War against the Kiyowara family in the province of Mutsu. By the 12th century, the Taira and Minamoto clans had emerged as Japan's two greatest sources of military might, earning special privileges for their efforts. When tensions came to a head during the epic Genpei War of 1180-1185, the Minamoto emerged supreme, usurping power from the emperor and handing it to the clan leader, a military dictator, called the shōgun.

Though the emperor remained a figurehead, this feudal society was ruled by the warrior class – the samurai – who served local lords in return for a food stipend, while their lords collected taxes and governed fiefs on behalf of the shōgun.

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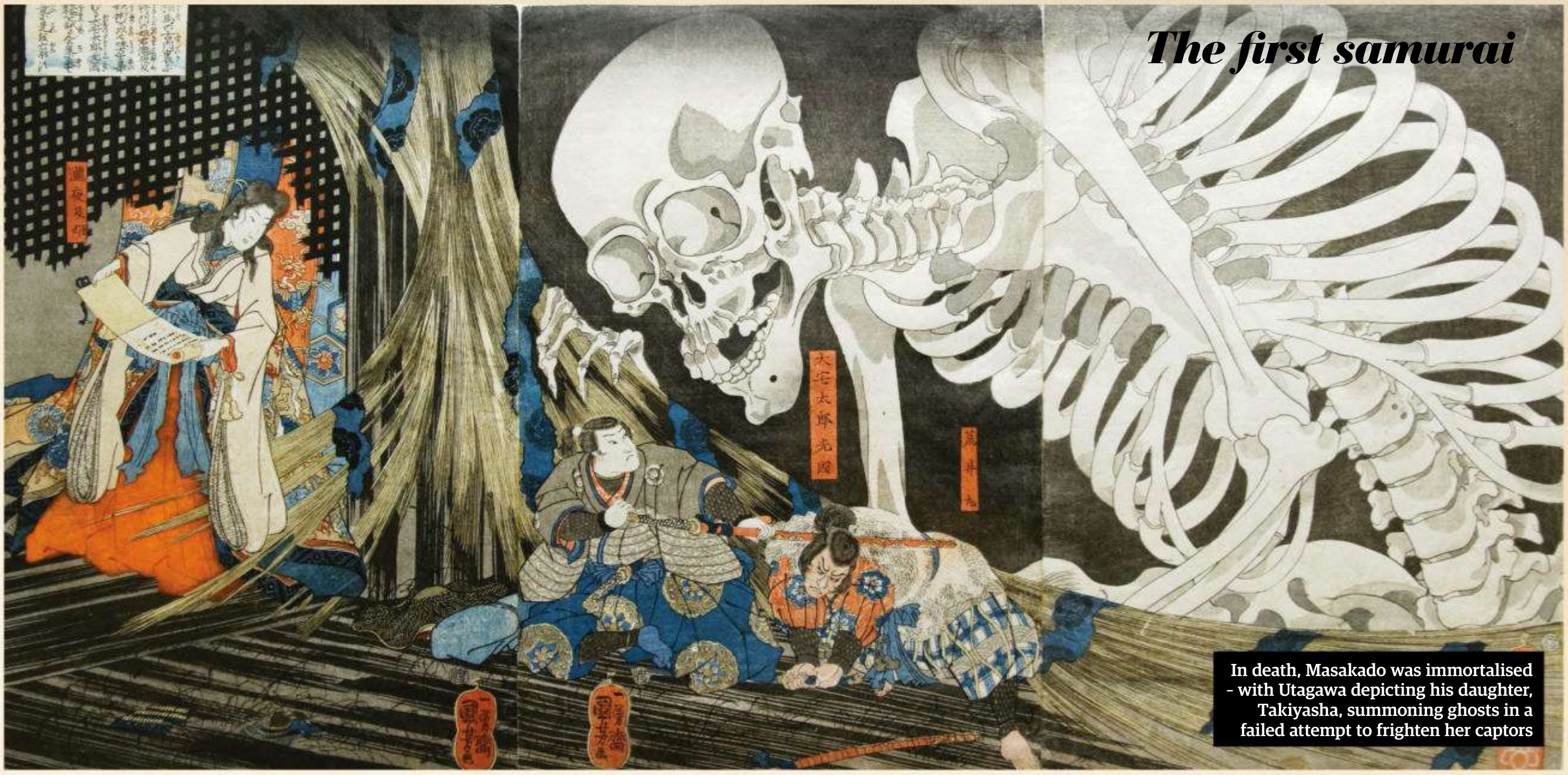


In death, Masakado was immortalised – with Utagawa depicting his daughter, Takiyasha, summoning ghosts in a failed attempt to frighten her captors

from shooting arrows at his men. Having beaten Masakado, who was rendered immobile by sudden illness, he defeated him again at Toyota. Shell-shocked, Masakado and his family sought shelter among sympathetic clan members – but a traitor helped Yoshikane capture his wife and children.

Licking his wounds, after years of unprovoked assaults, Masakado had finally run out of patience. Raising an army, he marched on Hitachi, burning his uncle's residence to the ground, along with hundreds of his supporters' houses. He chased Yoshikane into the mountains, destroying his crops along the way. Desperate, Yoshikane again bribed one of Masakado's men into betraying where his nephew slept and led a group of 80 warriors "each worth a thousand", to his camp. However, his nemesis was waiting for him, "with flaming eyes and clenched teeth". After a brief, explosive charge, half of Yoshikane's men lay dead. Broken, the Taira kingpin faded into obscurity, dying a few years later.

Although his troubles were far from over, Masakado had begun to develop something of a Robin Hood persona. When the controversial Prince Okiyo found himself at odds with the governor of Musahi, Masakado offered him shelter. Simultaneously, a local landowner, Fujiwara Haruaki, had developed a reputation for dodging his taxes – a man who official records said "behaved worse than barbarians or beasts". When the vice-governor put out a warrant for his arrest, Haruaki romped across Hitachi and Shimosa, robbing official granaries. As the region's constable, Masakado was ordered to arrest him, but instead offered him protection – claiming it his duty to protect the weak against the strong.

By June 939, Masakado's anti-authoritarian exploits had earned him an army of 1,000 mounted warriors, disenchanted with the established hierarchy. After defeating a large government army three times the size of his, Masakado seized the government's headquarters in Hitachi, before taking the provincial capital of Shimotsuke; along with its provincial seals and keys. Finally, after years of provocation, Masakado had broken out into full-blown rebellion. When Prince Okiyo pointed out that the punishment was equal whether he revolted in eight provinces or one, Masakado marched across Kantō – securing the entire region and appointing his own governors.

"Though the country had known insurrection, Masakado was no distant barbarian"

After supposedly consulting an oracle from Hachiman – the patron deity of war – Masakado did the unthinkable, declaring himself the 'New Emperor'. While his own brother admonished him for "acting without discretion" against the Mandate of Heaven, Masakado proclaimed, "Our age dictates that those who are victorious become rulers," before spitting, "your counsels are absolutely meaningless."

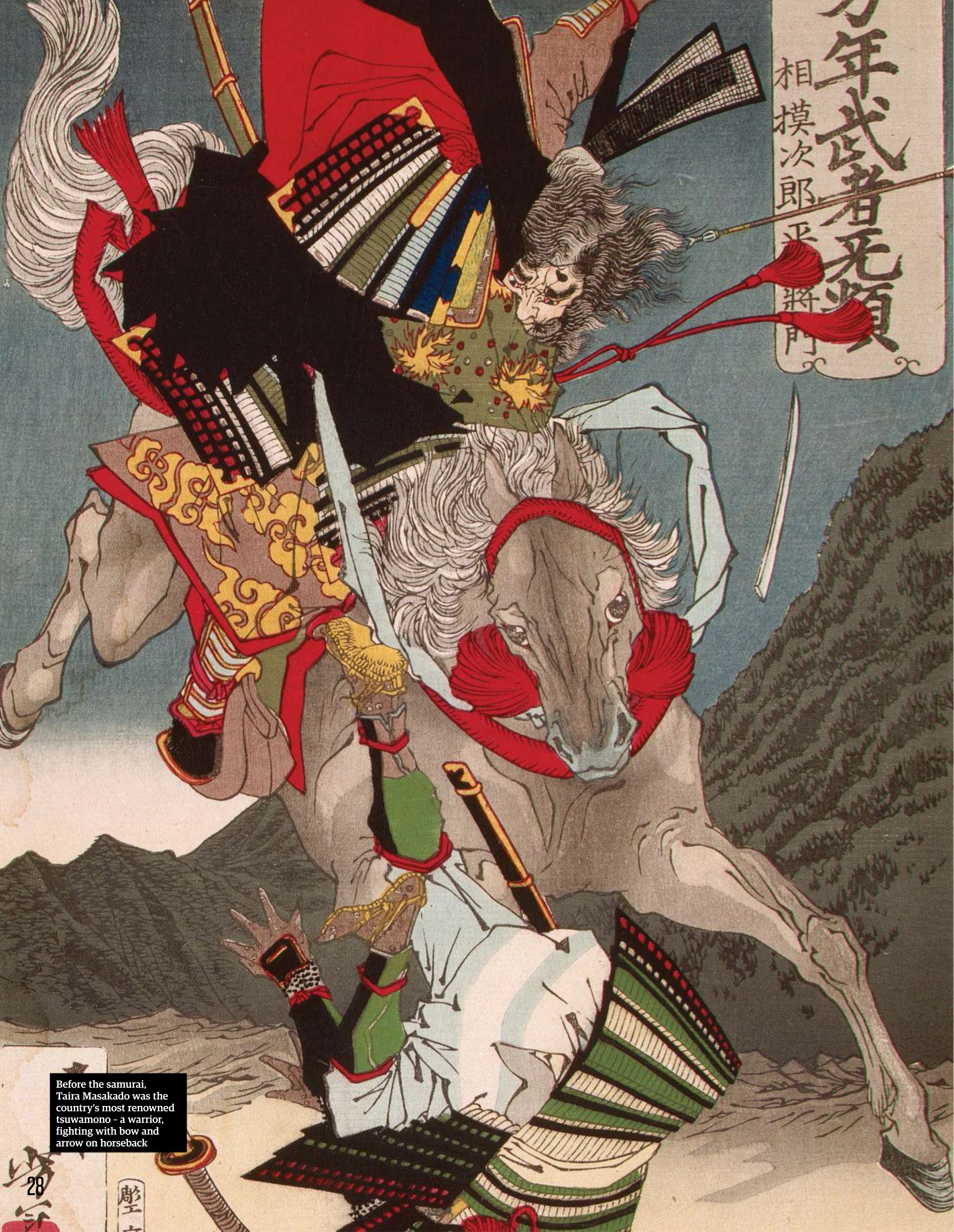
In January 940, he wrote to his former mentor, the regent Tadahira, justifying his actions, and claiming that his ambition lay only in Kantō. However, the court was understandably wary. During Masakado's uprising, further north, the previously 'pacified' Emishi people had broken out in revolt – destroying settlers' property. Simultaneously, an even greater rebellion had broken out west, under the leadership of the 'Pirate King' Fujiwara Sumitomo. Formerly the governor of Iyo, on the southern island of Shikoku, Sumitomo had amassed a fleet of fishermen and petty seamen, and begun raiding the Inland Sea. Though the government offered him a senior post, he was not so easily appeased – instead capturing the vice-governor of Settsu, cutting off his ears, slitting his nose, murdering his son and taking his wife captive.

Terrified that the two had formed a secret, unholy alliance, the Heian court issued an edict demanding the eastern governors capture Masakado, with rewards of land and positions up for grabs, adding: "Since creation, this court has seen many rebellions, but none that compare to this." Highlighting its desperation, it held elaborate services and prayers, and ordered rituals be committed across the country by the mystic cults – to destroy Masakado through black magic.

At this juncture, as the country's greatest tsuwamono, or warrior, Masakado had amassed an army of 5,000 – joined by family members, landowners and those drawn to his martial prowess. In doing so, he had essentially created the first of many bushidan, or warrior bands.

Though the country had known insurrection, Masakado was no distant barbarian – he was of the finest stock, fighting among his own blood. In this dawn of civil war, his followers, and those of his rivals, began to create a new culture, away from the elegance of the Heian court. While warriors like Sadamori still used powdered foetus to treat battle wounds, they also developed new customs; announcing their names with gusto, before rushing into battle. Similarly, they introduced the curved swords, lacquered o-yoroi armour worn by commanders, and elaborate antlered helmets that would later become hallmarks of samurai warfare.

Having abandoned conscription, the imperial army had been made irrelevant by the new face of warfare. Instead, the court dealt out promotions, hoping to inspire private soldiers – like Minamoto Tsunemoto, the vice-governor of Musahi, Sadamori and Fujiwara Hidesato, the chief constable of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相摸次郎平將門

Before the samurai, Taira Masakado was the country's most renowned tsuwamono – a warrior, fighting with bow and arrow on horseback

Shimotsuke – to take matters into their own hands. While Sadamori had joined the war reluctantly, after Masakado's men captured and raped his wife, their hatred was now mutual.

Unfortunately for Masakado, despite his heritage, ability and prestige, he lacked the structural organisation that his spiritual samurai successors would later herald to great success. While he led an army of 5,000 across Hitachi to search for Sadamori, he was dependent on allies, rather than direct retainers. Even among family members, many fought out of self-interest, rather than personal loyalty. So, when Masakado returned home, with winter approaching, so too did his allies – leaving him with an army of just 1,000. After the chief constable Hidesato announced his allegiance with Sadamori, Masakado's men thoughtlessly launched a pre-emptive attack – only to be driven back in February 940. The vengeful Sadamori burned down Masakado's mansion, as well as the homes of his supporters, unleashing chaos in the ranks.

> "Licking his wounds, after years of unprovoked assaults, Masakado had finally run out of patience"

The two sides picked the battleground of Kitayama, in Shimosa for their last showdown. Though both erected walls of wooden shields, to protect them from cavalry charges, a violent gust of wind blew from behind Masakado, throwing his defences forwards, and hurtling Sadamori's back into his soldiers.

With the defences down, the coalition's Fujiwara and Taira leaders launched a cavalry charge. Undeterred, Masakado hurled himself onto his horse and, with just 400 men, stormed into the enemy with such great ferocity, all but 300 fled. However, at this critical point, the wind turned against the New Emperor – and, as the enemy regrouped, he was hit by a stray arrow – killing him. Sadamori sent a lowly soldier to wrench his head from his body and took it to the capital, along with a certificate. Prince Okiyo was captured and killed just days later.

Meanwhile, the Pirate King Sumitomo, who had lost two chieftains and 2,500 men to bribes, was dealt a crushing blow after a turncoat surrendered to the government and led them to his base. Retreating to Kyushu, he sacked and raided all the way to Hakata, until he was eventually surrounded and killed.

With both rebels dead, the emperor visited the Kamo shrine and prayed for the dead – ally and enemy alike – at Enryakuji monastery on Mount Hiyei, overlooking the capital. Although peace had come, it had come at a high price. The nature of warfare, loyalty and rulership had been dealt a shocking blow – and though the emperor had won, it was not by the power of his state, but that of his provincial allies, and their private armies.

In the centuries to come, the Heian court blossomed into a centre of sophistication. Meanwhile, in the provinces, having cemented a stronger identity and honour code, the samurai would become the masters of Japan's emerging feudalist system. Though his rebellion was short-lived, Masakado was the harbinger of things to come, the personification of the new order. It was only a matter of time before the emperor lost his power; Masakado was simply 200 years too early. He left a legacy that would inspire the samurai for centuries to come: the idea that a warrior could be a courtly, educated man who followed his own moral code and valued his honour above all.

Masakado's legacy

More than 1,000 years after his death, Japan still fears the wrath of Masakado

According to legend, after Masakado's head was cut off and put on show in the capital, it flew off by itself, in search of its body, before landing at Kubizuka or 'Head Hill' – in a fishing village at the heart of modern Tokyo, right next to the Imperial Palace. Superstition has since surrounded it.

After the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, when the Ministry of Finance attempted to replace the hill with an office building, 14 employees died, including the minister himself, and many others suffered ominous injuries. Then, in 1940, a lightning bolt sparked a fire adjacent to the hill, burning down nine government buildings – again, including the Ministry of Finance.

It was one of the few sites in the area to survive allied bombing in WWII and when the occupying forces tried to build over it, a bulldozer hit the foundation stone – killing its driver. Though he was declared an enemy of the emperor in 1874, Masakado was re-deified, by popular demand, in 1984 at Tokyo's Kanda shrine. To this day, companies in the area pay donations to Kubizuka, making employees go on pilgrimages to it, and laying out their offices in such a way that no one sits with their back to Masakado's grave.

Masakado is enshrined at Tokyo's Kanda Myojin shrine, where he is revered, and feared, to this day as a patron deity

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Every year, Fukushima residents take part in the Sama Nomaoi festival, a celebration of military exercises founded by Masakado

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平安清

Secrets of the samurai

We delve into the tradition, dissect the legends and reveal the innovations that made the samurai one of the most renowned fighting forces in history

Written by Jonathan Gordon, additional writing by Callum McKelvie

Of all the warriors of history, the samurai are some of the most iconic. The dramatic silhouette of their armour, the demonic snarls fixed on their face masks and the deadly sharpness of their blades are images well established in our minds even if you know little else about their background. Like the Spartans before them, we know the samurai primarily as a warrior class, seemingly devoted to combat and the perfection of their lethal skills.

Naturally, the truth is a little more nuanced and complex. The legends and tales of the samurai that have passed down into popular culture paint a very particular, romantic ideal of the group. As Nitobe Inazō pointed out in his most famous work, Bushido: The Soul Of Japan in 1900, they have much in common with medieval knights in that their stories dominate the social landscape of their era even though they made up only a small fraction of the population. They even have in common that they were supposed to live as examples of their warrior codes: chivalry in Europe, Bushido in Japan.

But who were the samurai exactly? Well, it's important to point out that they were not just soldiers, conscripted or otherwise, but an entire social class. From the 12th century to their abolition in 1870 the samurai were the military nobility of Japan, employed as retainers by wealthy landholders or warlords (called daimyo) to manage their lands. It was not, however, as rigid as it would become.

"The warrior caste was more poorly defined before 1600, so you could have some people not just become samurai but rise to become lords and even de facto rulers of Japan," explains Dr Nyri A Bakkalian, who has written extensively on Japanese military history. "The idea that there was a rigid warrior caste – what we now shorthand as samurai – was more vaguely defined before the Edo period (1600-1868). As a result, the structure of an average fighting force varied. There were armies of peasant conscripts, especially in the 16th century's period of endemic warfare, but as the 16th century gave way to the 17th, the caste system's lines became more rigid, and while there were some statuses – like ashigaru (infantry, literally 'light of foot') – that blurred the lines between warrior and peasant, warfare became the purview of the warrior caste only. It would not be until the early 1860s that there were once again non-warrior conscript armies."

The beginnings of the social stratification that saw the samurai class emerge can be traced back to the Taika Reforms made by Emperor Kōtoku in 645. Based upon the Tang dynasty in China, what followed was several imperial ranks of bureaucrats being codified, the sixth ranks and below being named samurai. It's believed that this name was then inherited by the generations that followed. The Heian period (794–1185) had seen the title of shogun emerge as a means of controlling regional areas with local officials on behalf of the emperor, and from 1185 in the Kamakura period samurai started being employed to defend the estates of the shogun. This gradual process would greatly change the balance of power throughout Japan.

How it was that the samurai came to dominate the military landscape of Japan from this point on comes down to some fairly basic human instincts. "The old court nobles were lazy, leading up to the 12th century," explains Bakkalian. "They held titles and estates from which they drew their income,

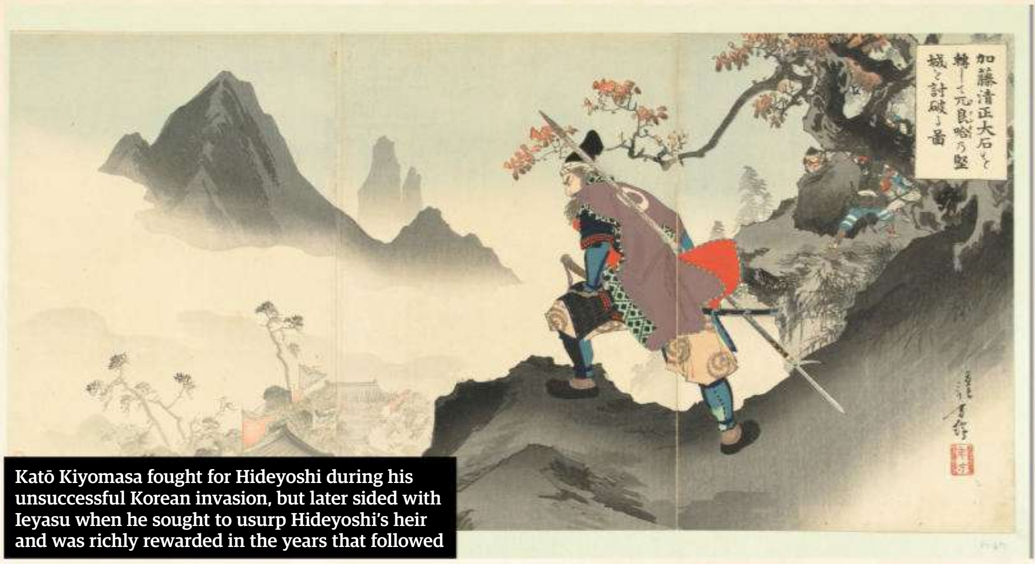
EXPERT BIO

Dr Nyri A Bakkalian

Dr Nyri A Bakkalian received her PhD from the University of Pittsburgh and has produced nonfiction, fiction and photography content for more than a dozen publications, including two newspapers and five anthologies. Her first book, *Grey Dawn*, was released in August 2020 from Balance Of Seven Press. You can follow Dr Bakkalian's work on Twitter, Facebook, Substack and Patreon at @riversidewings

Illustration by: Joe Cummings

but they were living in the flowering culture of the imperial capital, Kyoto, and enjoying the delights of culture and literature it offered. I can't blame them for not wanting to be as involved with the provinces! Going out to the provinces from Kyoto isn't just a drain on resources and time, in an era before ubiquitous roads and bridges, but to people used to poetry and parties in the capital it's also no fun. So they hired samurai in order to oversee and guard those lands. Eventually, the samurai realized they had the swords and thus had the power to be taken seriously by the men in Kyoto, and eventually Minamoto no Yoritomo, himself of warrior roots, was appointed shogun by the emperor in 1185. His was the first shogunate."



Katō Kiyomasa fought for Hideyoshi during his unsuccessful Korean invasion, but later sided with Ieyasu when he sought to usurp Hideyoshi's heir and was richly rewarded in the years that followed

Image source: wiki/Rijksmuseum

With shoguns emerging with more power and samurai able to establish power bases of their own, conflict was inevitable between the factions, but Japan would also look like a ripe nation for conquest. So it was, for instance, that the Mongol Yuan dynasty of China under Kublai Khan sought to invade on two occasions, first in 1274 when a samurai force of 10,000 repelled 40,000 from China, and again in 1281 when 40,000 stood up against a force of 140,000. On both occasions weather conditions were in favour of the defending Japanese forces, with a typhoon hitting Hakata Bay in 1281 that decimated the invading Yuan army. The Japanese called these winds the 'kami-no-kaze' or 'wind of the gods'. The belief also began to spread that Japan was under some form of divine protection from foreign invasion.

During this time two important elements of what would become the heart of samurai life began to emerge. Zen Buddhism became prevalent among the warrior class, teaching as it did that they should not fear death or the taking of life. Zen would go on to play a major part in the Bushido code that developed in later years. It was also during the 13th century that the blacksmithing art of laminating steel of varying types to create an incredibly strong and sharp blade was developed. This formed the basis of the daishō, the two blades that samurai would always be seen carrying. The more well-known sword, the katana, was the long blade and most used. The smaller wakizashi blade was intended for use in tighter spaces, such as indoors.

"The samurai realised they had the swords and thus had the power to be taken seriously by the men in Kyoto"

Samurai continued to hold a great deal of power and influence long into the 19th century, but gradually had their privileges stripped away from the 1860s onwards

Image source: wiki/Capital Collections

The years that followed were dominated by internal conflict. From 1467 the 'Age of Warring States', or Sengoku period, began and it was here that the samurai class began to truly define itself. But what developed was not necessarily the highly disciplined warrior style that you might imagine. "There wasn't any one style of samurai warfare, Japan doesn't border any other country by land, and there wasn't a warrior class other than the samurai," Bakkalian explains. "So what we might term as samurai fighting style varies wildly depending on the era, the weapon, and the region. It has many influences both brought about by innovation borne out of battle – as with Miyamoto Musashi's brute force, usually a two-sworded fighting style immortalised in his treatise *A Book Of Five Rings* – as well as outside influences like guns (from Portugal) and heavy polearms (from China)."

In many ways, the samurai valued pragmatism over all things. The fastest way to victory, regardless of weapon, was what a warrior should care about. Even so, many did specialise in a specific weapon and could make their name doing so. "There were samurai who had exceptional skill with a particular weapon – one needs go no further than Yagyū Munenori's skill with the sword, or Nasu no Yoichi's skill with the bow," Bakkalian reveals. "But generally speaking, especially before the Edo period, there seems to have been an understanding that you train with anything you can get your hands on, because the idea is to win. It's only in more peaceful times, as in the Edo period, where there's the room to specialise particularly deeply. But even there, if a samurai knew how to fight, it was generally with more than one weapon, along with some measure of understanding of unarmed grappling."

This relatively broad approach to weaponry also extended to firearms, which might come as a surprise to some in the face of the puritanical

The many ways of the sword

Eight of the most common samurai fighting styles

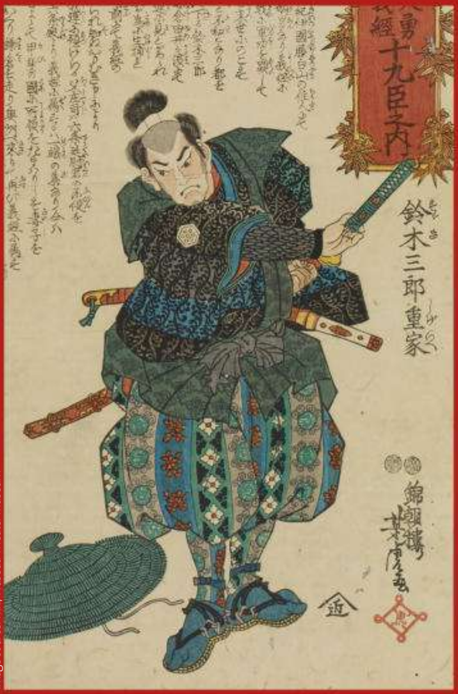


Image source: wiki/Waseda Theater Museum

Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu

This sword-fighting style placed great emphasis on awareness and speed. Its most famous move, seen often in modern depictions of samurai, is the quick drawing and cutting action with a katana.

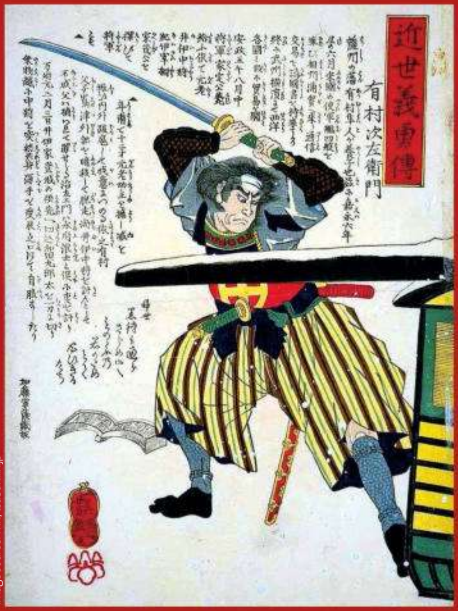


Image source: wiki/tsubaki.lix.jp

Jigen-ryu

This school of swordsmanship was all about getting an instant kill with a powerful first strike. Practitioners of this style tended to hold the sword high and vertically so they could sweep down through the body.

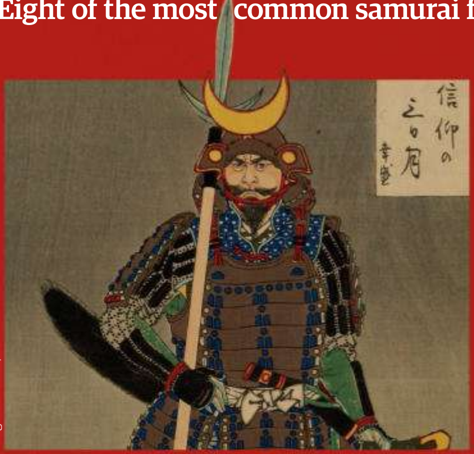


Image source: wiki/Walters Art Museum

Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto-ryu

The oldest school of swordsmanship in Japan, dating back to 1447. Pupils were given multidisciplinary training using swords, spears, staffs, and jujitsu hand-to-hand combat. Many pre-Edo warriors would go into this bracket.

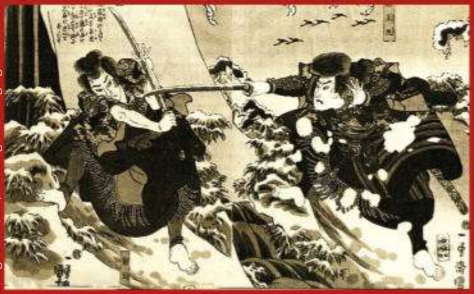


Image source: wiki/Unterwegs in die Vergangenheit

Mugai-ryu

Combining both kenjutsu (sword-fighting) and iaijutsu (quick-drawing), this school was most interested in duels and making sure its practitioners were highly skilled in one-on-one combat, very different to battlefield experience.

Image source: wiki/visipix.com

Yagyu Shinkage-ryu

This style was all about subtle, flowing movement and put more emphasis on disarming your opponent rather than striking them down. Its name means Shadow School.

Image source: wiki/Walters Art Museum

Ono-ha Itto-ryu

Translating as 'one sword' this style focused on achieving a single, powerful strike to take out the adversary in one go. Its 150 specific techniques also form the basis of kendo.

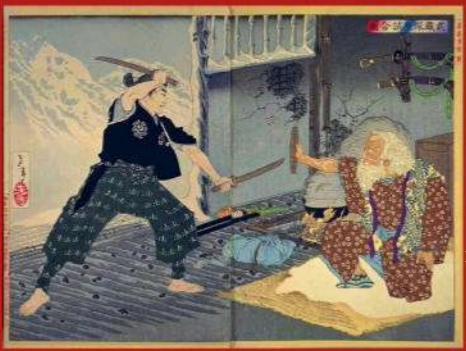


Image source: wiki/muian.com

Hyoho Niten Ichi-ryu

The two swords used by samurai were alternated depending on the closeness of the opponent. This school taught a dual-wielding technique that attacked with one blade while defending with the other.

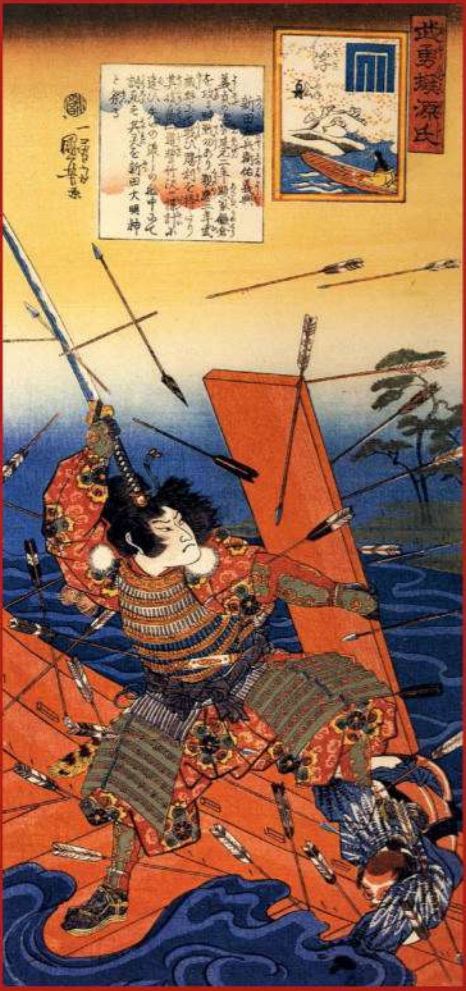
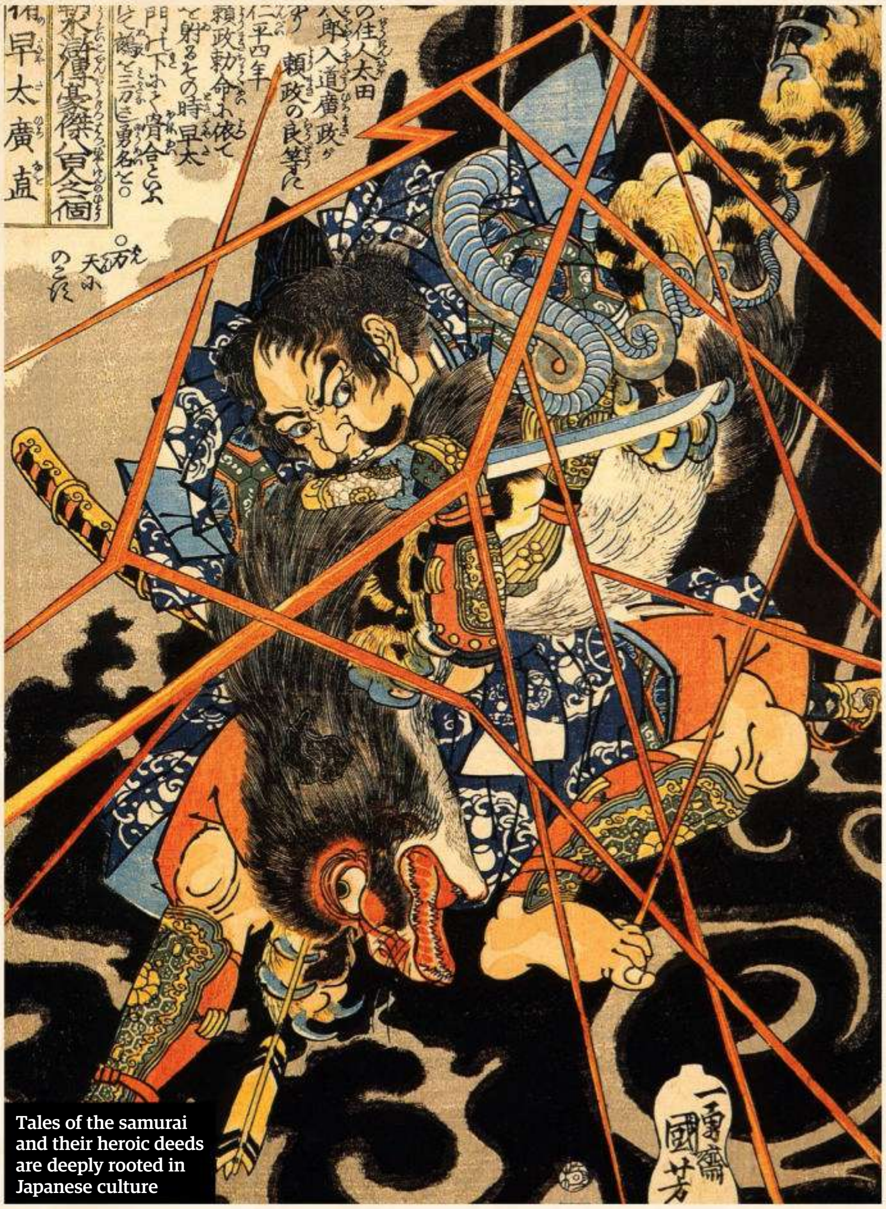


Image source: wiki/visipix.com

Tamiya-ryu

Developed in the later stages of the Muromachi period, this style of sword-fighting utilised a katana with a longer hilt, which gave the sword more stability – perfect for the big, but accurate, movements involved.



Tales of the samurai and their heroic deeds are deeply rooted in Japanese culture

Image source: wiki/visipix.com

Samurai were more than just fearsomely skilled warriors – they were an elite social class

Image source: wiki/National Museum of Denmark

reputation that samurai would gain in later fiction. The first matchlock rifles, made in Portugal, arrived in Japan by way of Chinese pirates in 1543 and it didn't take long for them to be incorporated into the tactics of samurai on the battlefield. Oda Nobunaga and Tokugawa Ieyasu were two men who did just that, and went on to be known as two of the three great unifiers of Japan, Ieyasu himself becoming the first shogun of the Edo period, ruling over all Japan. Bakkalian picks out one instance of their innovation as particularly interesting: "If I had to pick one really salient example focused on Tokugawa Ieyasu's time, it would be the use of rotating volleys of gunfire employed by the Oda-Tokugawa combined force that faced the Takeda clan at Nagashino in 1575. This cut down the vaunted Takeda cavalry at a frightening pace! So I think we'd do well to remain mindful of the fact that despite their veneration of the sword, in the Edo period especially, gunnery remained a fixture of Japanese warfare from the 16th century on."

Of course, this also meant that changes needed to be made to traditional armour manufacturing, something that Bakkalian has been digging into in her work. "My own research has focused on the house of Date, a clan in northern Japan in this period which founded the modern city of Sendai, and they didn't just extensively use firearms, they also had a mass-produced, customisable type of armour. This customisable nature facilitated recognition in battle, and its ease of production let the Date clan equip its army uniformly; the latter point being something that Date Masamune, the Date lord contemporary to Tokugawa, is on record as having emphasised. Because this armour was popularised by the Date clan of Sendai, it's sometimes called 'Sendai-do' ('Sendai cuirass')."

Nobunaga was the first of the warlords to begin the process of unifying Japan and Ieyasu was the third who would ultimately complete that journey. Between them came Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who is an interesting case study because his life is an example of some of the fluidity that existed before the Edo period and perhaps partly the inspiration for the stricter social structures that would follow for samurai. Unlike the other daimyo and so many of the samurai class, Hideyoshi was born a peasant retainer to the Oda clan who had risen up through the ranks, earning his class status. But after his passing, as Ieyasu looked to cement the work of his forebears to unite the nation under a single ruler and with a single national identity, the concept of social mobility was massively curtailed. In a subtle way Hideyoshi had actually started that process when he passed laws making it legal only for the samurai to carry weapons in public and had then ordered the samurai to leave the countryside and reside in the major cities. This was intended as a way to disarm the peasantry and make maintaining the peace easier, but it also reinforced the class divides of the nation.

This was a state of affairs that would last for most of the Edo period. "After 1600, most of the time, you had to be born a samurai," explains Bakkalian. "Closer to the end of the Edo period, in the 19th century, there was a resurgence of people from other castes becoming samurai, sometimes even by buying the status from their local lord or from the shogunate. Mind you, if you bought the status, you became a vassal to that lord, and with that came responsibilities, so it wasn't always attractive. Just before the caste's abolition it got to where it was a matter of buying a second sword and maybe changing your name and hairstyle."

It was under the leadership of Tokugawa Ieyasu as the first shogun of the Edo period that the samurai began to more firmly cement the identity that has come to be known today. In many ways, Ieyasu himself embodied many of the traits that we associate so closely with the warrior class: calm under pressure and quick to strike when the opportunity emerged. "The biggest thing to remember about Tokugawa Ieyasu is that he was patient," says Bakkalian. "He was skilled in battlefield command, sure, but he seems to have understood that one doesn't just win wars on the battlefield. He was also good at building coalitions and waiting out rivals, which only strengthened

> "After 1600, most of the time you had to be born a samurai"

Since samurai armour was custom-made, armies would use heraldry in the form of flags called sashimono strapped to their backs to identify their allies

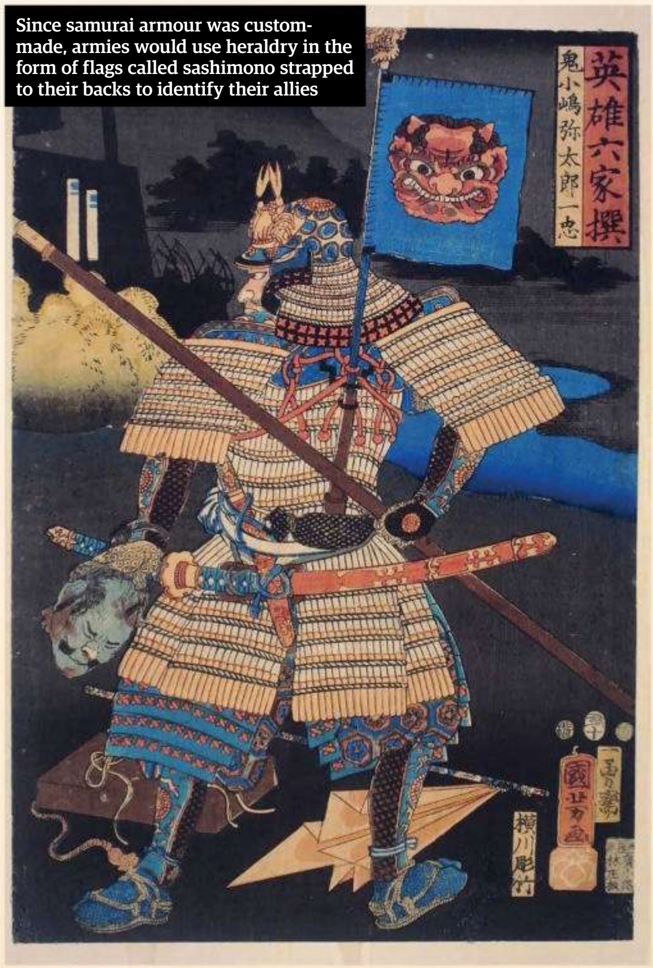
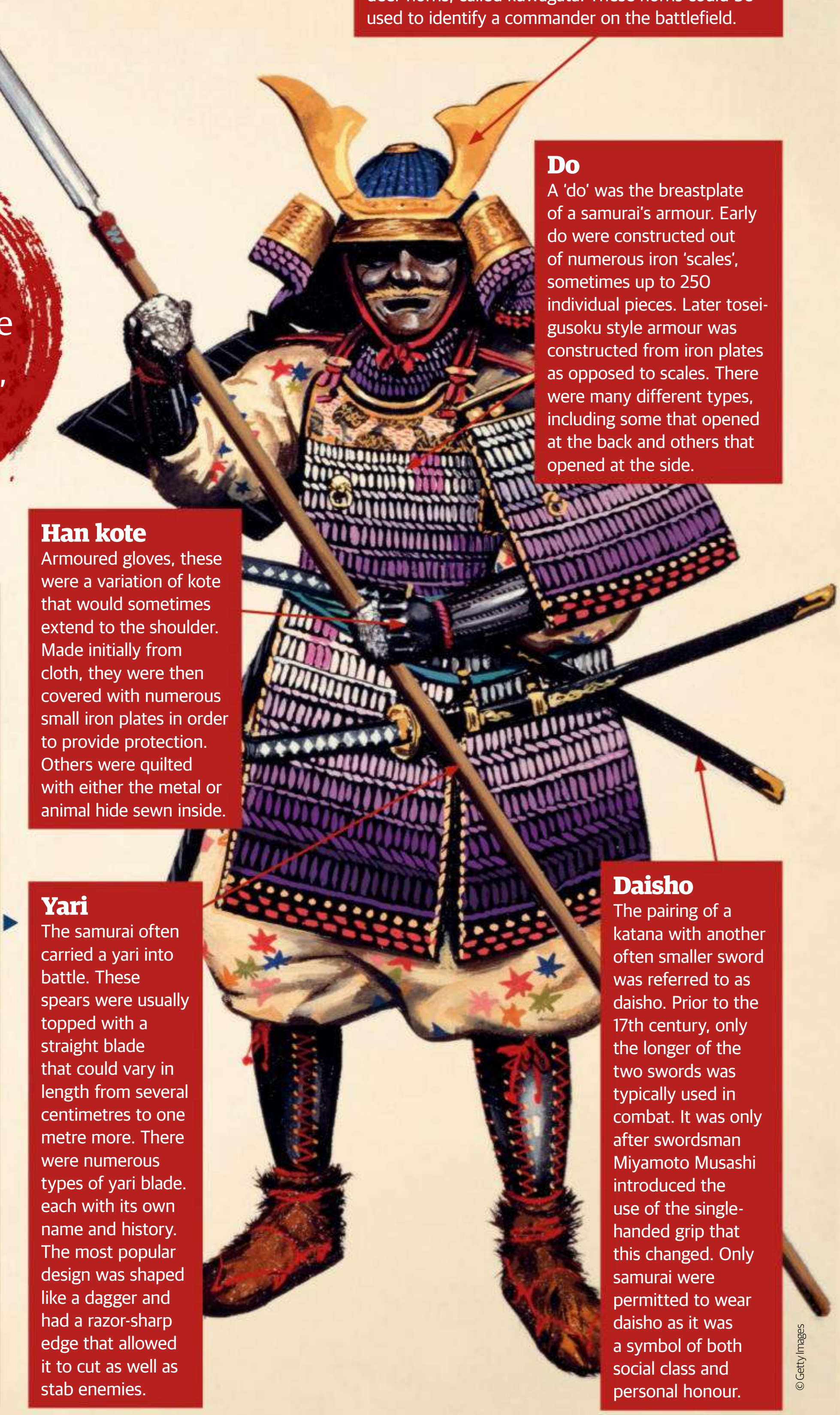

英雄六家撰
鬼小嶋弥太郎一忠
一勇斎國芳画

Image source: wiki/Utagawa Kuniyoshi

A warrior's armour

Key details of the samurai's iconic uniform



Datemono/tatemono
These crests often adorned the top of a samurai's helmet. This decoration could vary and could be of family crests or mottos, while some of the more elaborate had small sculptures of animals or mythical creatures. Horns however became particularly popular and especially those that resembled stylised deer horns, called kuwagata. These horns could be used to identify a commander on the battlefield.

Do
A 'do' was the breastplate of a samurai's armour. Early do were constructed out of numerous iron 'scales', sometimes up to 250 individual pieces. Later tosei-gusoku style armour was constructed from iron plates as opposed to scales. There were many different types, including some that opened at the back and others that opened at the side.

Han kote
Armoured gloves, these were a variation of kote that would sometimes extend to the shoulder. Made initially from cloth, they were then covered with numerous small iron plates in order to provide protection. Others were quilted with either the metal or animal hide sewn inside.

Yari
The samurai often carried a yari into battle. These spears were usually topped with a straight blade that could vary in length from several centimetres to one metre more. There were numerous types of yari blade. each with its own name and history. The most popular design was shaped like a dagger and had a razor-sharp edge that allowed it to cut as well as stab enemies.

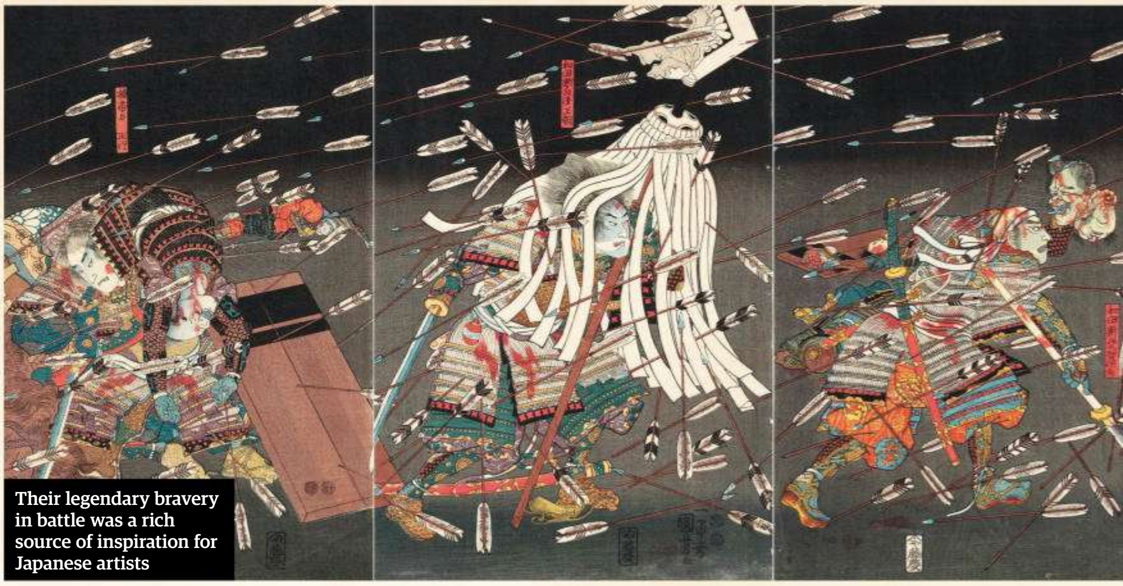
Daisho
The pairing of a katana with another often smaller sword was referred to as daisho. Prior to the 17th century, only the longer of the two swords was typically used in combat. It was only after swordsman Miyamoto Musashi introduced the use of the single-handed grip that this changed. Only samurai were permitted to wear daisho as it was a symbol of both social class and personal honour.

© Getty Images

the odds of his ultimate victory. There's an apocryphal poem attributed to him that says 'If the nightingale doesn't sing, I'll wait for it to sing', which illustrates this perfectly. He couldn't have done what he did alone – Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi set the stage for Tokugawa Ieyasu's ultimate victory and final unification of Japan – but his patience and his skill at big-picture thinking allowed him to reach that point rather than fizzle out or self-destruct as many of his contemporaries did. I highly recommend the late Professor Conrad Totman's short biography *Tokugawa Ieyasu: Shogun* for an eminently accessible account of this fascinating man's life."

Ieyasu would officially be made shogun by Emperor Go-Yozei in 1603, abdicating in 1605 as was tradition and then continuing as ogosho (retired shogun), still essentially running the country. After the Battle of Sekigahara brought him to power and the Osaka campaigns crushed the last of the resistance to his rule, the Edo period entered into a long age of relative peace. It was during this time, without war to occupy them, that a unified samurai identity alsobegan to take shape.

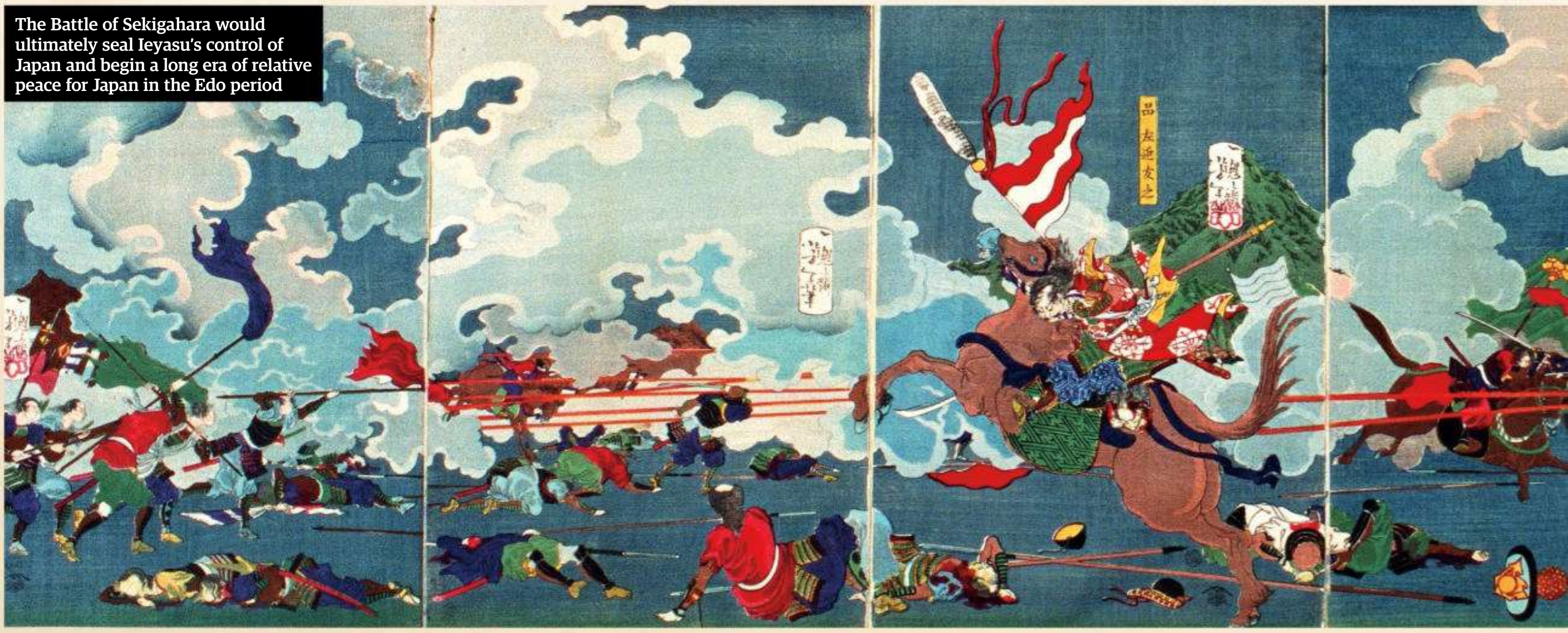
What is a warrior to do when they have no wars to fight? Well, as an aristocratic class, many sought positions of power in the new administration. "Without regular warfare, the samurai caste's warrior obligations became more theoretical, though some modicum of training in the martial arts was still expected," Bakkalian tells us. "Samurai were warriors by birth but were government functionaries or teachers or engineers, or any number of other occupations that formed the ranks of either the shogunate's or the feudal domains' governments. Meteoric rise and promotion, which was more common in the 16th century, became uncommon, and status within the samurai caste became less flexible.



Their legendary bravery in battle was a rich source of inspiration for Japanese artists

Samurai were held up as exemplars of morality for the rest of the population to look up to

2x © Getty Images



The Battle of Sekigahara would ultimately seal Ieyasu's control of Japan and begin a long era of relative peace for Japan in the Edo period

Image source: wiki

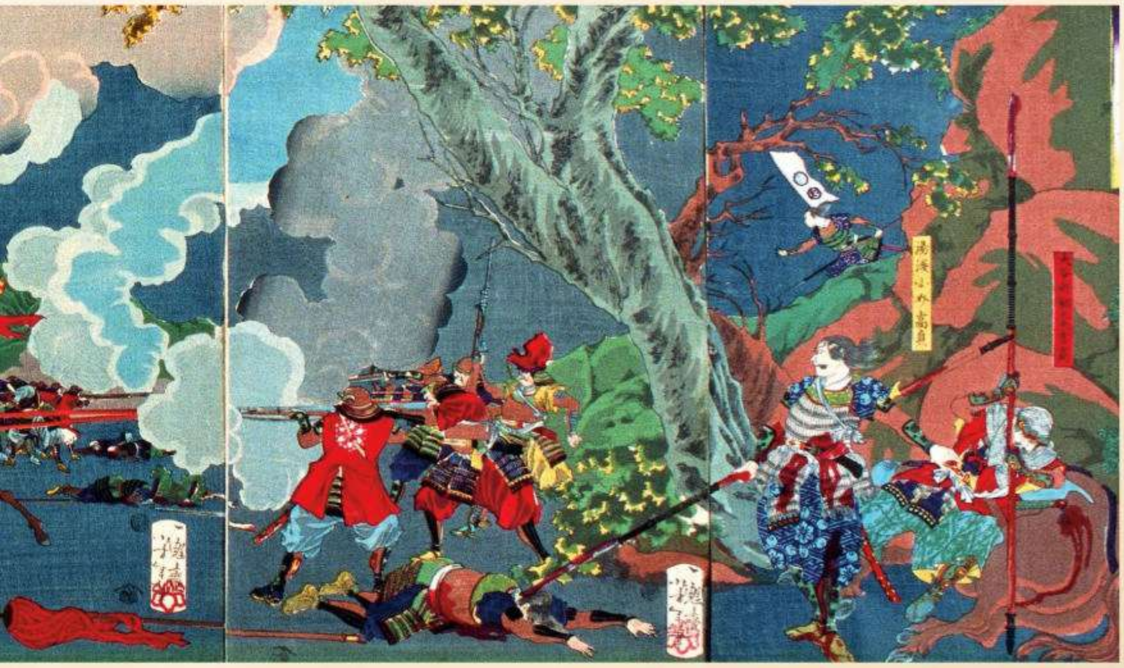
Especially in the middle and later parts of this era, some domains even had strict codification of what colours a samurai of a given rank could wear. It wasn't until the era's last century, when the US Navy's gunboats broke Japan's isolation, that the status quo was shaken – and barely 15 years later, the Tokugawa shogunate came to an end altogether."

Those lower down the ranks unable to rise up like they might have done in the past sought other avenues and businesses. "Without increases in stipend many samurai, especially of lower rank, had to find other ways of supplementing their incomes," Bakkalian continues. "I think my favourite case is one company of ashigaru (foot soldiers) in Sendai domain, who had guard duty over a certain bridgehead east of the castle town. They supplemented their meagre stipends by selling okoshi, which is a pastry that resembles modern puffed rice squares." In other times and places, such large numbers of warriors might have caused internal conflict or sought glory through empire building abroad, but Japan instead closed itself off from the world and it seems the samurai didn't waste this chance for self- reflection. Buddhism had already been an influential philosophy as mentioned before but Confucius and Mencius, with their teachings about loyalty and honour, became required reading for samurai in the mid-16th century too. The idea that samurai could be living examples of moral virtues began to take shape and from this combination of Zen Buddhism, Confucius and a little Shintō (Japan's indigenous religion) the concept of Bushido, meaning 'the way of the warrior' took shape. Being a samurai had to become about more than just being a good fighter, since opportunities to prove that began to thin out.

> "It wasn't until the era's last century, when the US Navy's gunboats broke Japan's isolation, that the status quo was shaken"

There were still conflicts, as Bakkalian explains: "There were many peasant uprisings during the Edo period, in which the shogunate's forces or the local lords' forces were again called into action. But for the most part, after the Shimabara Uprising of 1638, there were no regular large-scale military operations by samurai again until the 1850s." So Bushido came to revolve around respecting martial acts, being prudent and measured in word and deed. Samurai boys were given swords from as young as five years old and taught to respect these dangerous tools.

Bushido, the image and culture of the samurai, became the heart of the new, united Japan of the Edo period. It was an image that would ultimately be rejected during the rapid westernisation of the Meiji Restoration in the mid-19th century and would reemerge to drive the war effort in the 20th century. Ultimately, the samurai were so much more than just warriors, as Japanese author Nitobe Inazō puts it in *Bushido: The Soul Of Japan*: "What Japan was she owed to the samurai. They were not only the flower of the nation but its root as well. All the gracious gifts of Heaven flowed through them. Though they kept themselves socially aloof from the populace, they set a moral standard for them and guided them by their example."



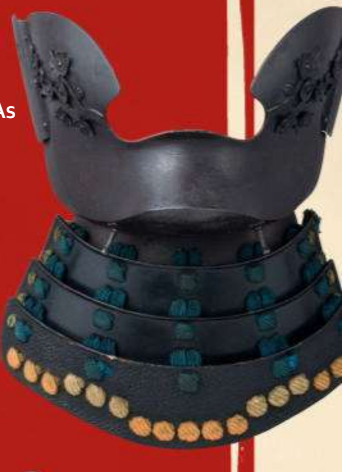
3x Image source: Metropolitan Museum of Art

The importance of masks

Samurai face coverings came in many designs and sizes

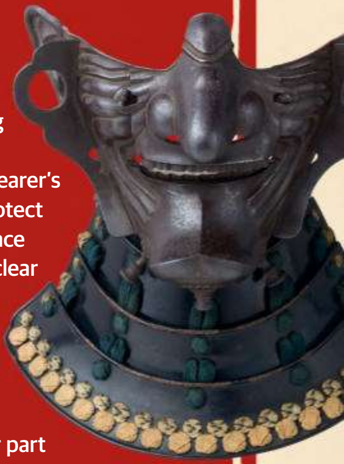
Hanbo

This variation covers only the lower part of the face, from the mouth downwards. As the masks were steel and therefore could become incredibly hot, a small hole was located underneath the chin to allow for the drainage of sweat. The interiors of the masks were usually lacquered in stark reds and golds.



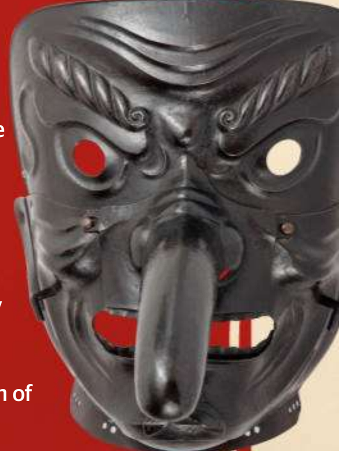
Menpo

The majority of samurai masks were of this type, covering the nose and face directly below the wearer's eyes. This helped protect the majority of the face while still providing clear and uninterrupted vision. They would also help secure a samurai's helmet to his head – this would also shield the upper part of the face.



Somen

A somen is a type of that covered the warrior's entire face. Developed during the Muromachi period, they then evolved to incorporate human features, before the masks of the Edo period became wildly more imaginative. The example here shows a tengu, a form of malevolent demon.



Japanese feudal era

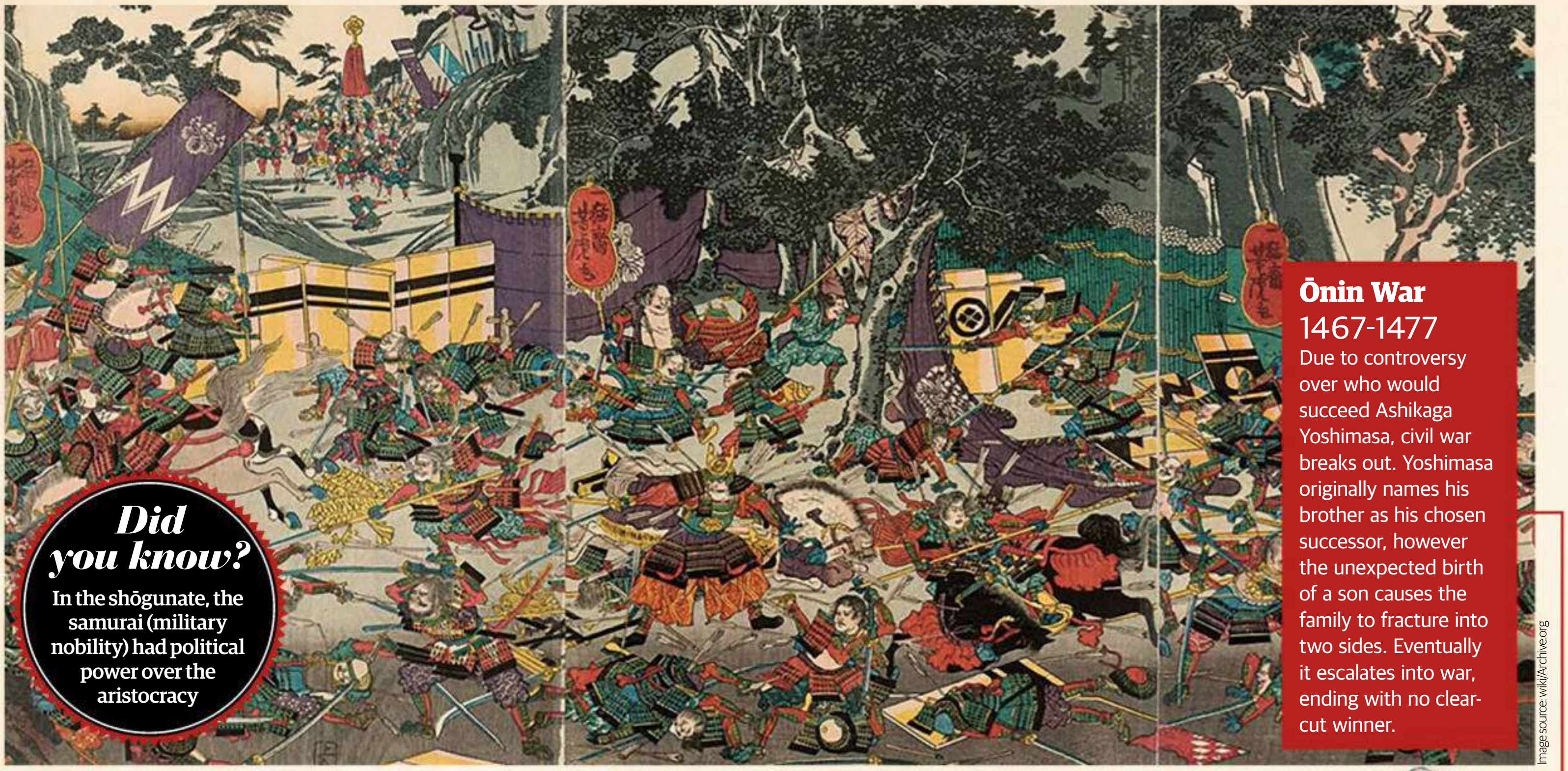


Image source: wiki/Archive.org

Did you know?

In the shōgunate, the samurai (military nobility) had political power over the aristocracy

Ōnin War 1467-1477

Due to controversy over who would succeed Ashikaga Yoshimasa, civil war breaks out. Yoshimasa originally names his brother as his chosen successor, however the unexpected birth of a son causes the family to fracture into two sides. Eventually it escalates into war, ending with no clear-cut winner.

Minamoto Yoritomo begins the Kamakura period 1192

After winning the Gempei War (between the Taira and Minamoto clans) Minamoto Yoritomo establishes the feudal military government: the Kamakura Shōgunate.

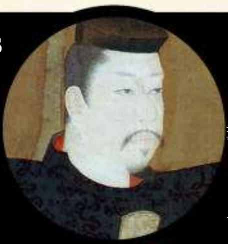


Image source: wiki/ Fujiwara No Takanobu

Wokou pirates become rampant 1350

Raids from pirates become particularly fierce. Attempts are made to fight back, including the Ōei invasion of 1419. General Zhu Wan becomes known for his fierce stance against the pirates.

Southern and Northern Courts reunited 1392

After being split between the Southern Court (four emperors who claimed sovereignty) and the Northern Court (six pretenders) an agreement is reached for reunification.

Image source: wiki/David Luizo

1192 1274 1333 1457

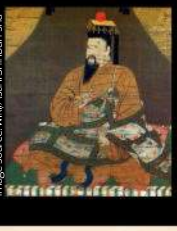


Image source: wiki/Asahi Shinbun-sha

Kemmu Restoration 1333

Emperor Go-Daigo restores imperial power, bringing back a civilian government after a century and a half of military rule. But this fails and is replaced with the Ashikaga Shōgunate.

Jinno Shotoki written 1341

Kitabatake Chikafusa writes the Jinnō Shōtōki, mostly as an attempt to justify the importance of an emperor. This book formalises the transition from ruler to mystical symbol.

Image source: wiki/Kikuchi Yosai

Construction of Edo Castle 1457

A flatland castle built by Ōta Dōkan, it's one of the first foundations of what would become modern-day Tokyo.

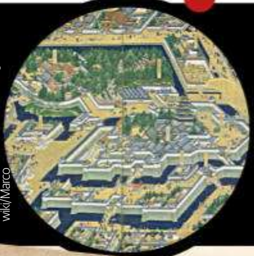


Image source: wiki/Marco

First Mongol invasion of Japan 1274

Wishing Japan to become a vassal state, Kublai Khan dispatches emissaries requesting tribute. However, when the emissaries return time and time again empty handed the Khan declares war. The Mongolian army makes significant progress but is defeated with heavy losses at the Battle of Torikai-Gata. A second invasion is defeated in 1281.

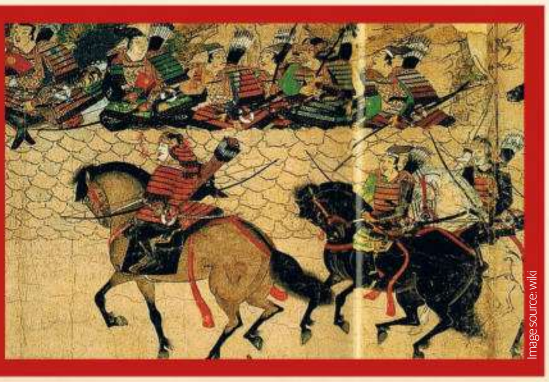


Image source: wiki

Muromachi period 1338

Overthrowing the Kemmu Restoration, Ashikaga Takauji proclaims himself shōgun, beginning the Muromachi period. Takauji is known for his lack of fear, his mercy and generosity to those below him. In 1467, during the Ōnin War the shōgunate has all but collapsed.

Image source: wiki/ Tsukioka Yoshitoshi

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Honno-ji incident 1582

At Honno-ji temple in Kyoto, Oda Nobunaga is surrounded only by officials and servants. The Akechi army marches on the temple in a coup. Unable to repel the attackers, Nobunaga commits suicide and his young page sets fire to the temple. Nobunaga's remains are never found.

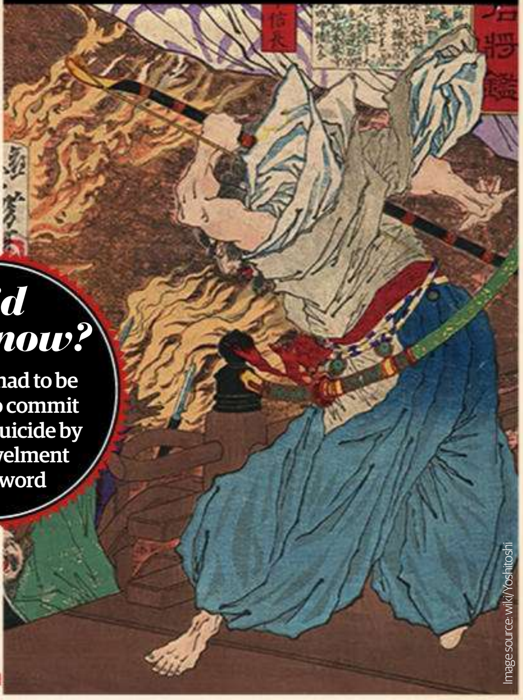

Image source: wiki/Yoshitoshi

Did you know?

A samurai had to be prepared to commit seppuku - suicide by disembowelment with a sword

Battle of Miyajima 1551

In 1551 Sue Harukata rebels against his lord Ōuchi Yoshitaka. Mōri Motonari, a vassal of the Ōuchi clan, seeks vengeance and the two forces clash on the island Miyajima. The island is a shrine, with no birth or death allowed, and so is extensively cleansed afterwards.

Image source: wiki/Utagawa Toyonobu

Battle of Okehazama 1560

Oda Nobunaga defeats Imagawa Yoshimoto and establishes himself as one of the leading warlords, with many samurai pledging allegiance to him.

Image source: wiki/cha.go.kr

Invasion of Korea 1592

Toyotomi Hideyoshi attempts to conquer the Korean Peninsula and China, however the invasion fails. A second invasion begins in 1597, but this too ends in failure.

Beginning of the Edo Period 1603

Tokugawa shōgunate officially founds the Edo period following the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, and takes three years to consolidate his power.

1543 1582 1603

Battle of Yamazaki 1582

Toyotomi Hideyoshi meets Akechi Mitsuhide (who rebelled against Oda Nobunga) in battle, having allied himself with the Mōri clan, and defeats him. Hideyoshi takes control.

Image source: wiki/ morimiya.net

Invasion of Shikoku 1585

Toyotomi Hideyoshi invades the island of Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's main islands, and seizes it from rival warlord Chōsokabe Motochika.

San Felipe Incident 1596

The Spanish ship San Felipe is shipwrecked on the island of Shikoku. The Japanese accuse Christian missionaries in Japan of being 'fifth columnists' – 26 are crucified.

Image source: wiki/ retabloceramico.net

Nanban trade 1543

The first Europeans arrive in Japan and establish a long-distance trade route. This begins with a group of Portuguese explorers, missionaries and merchants who introduce refined sugar, galleon-style ship building, Christianity and, of course, firearms.

Image source: wiki/Hokusai

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Construction of Osaka Castle 1586

Toyotomi Hideyoshi commences the building of Ōsaka Castle. Modelled after his predecessor Oda Nobunaga's headquarters, Azuchi Castle, he seeks to surpass it. The castle features a five-storey main tower, with gold leaf on the sides. Having been reconstructed, it stands to this day.

Himeji Castle

Himeji, Japan

Himeji Castle is a Japanese National Treasure as well as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's also one of Japan's 12 original castles, with the current complex completed in 1618 and widely considered to be a fine example of early 17th century Japanese castle architecture.

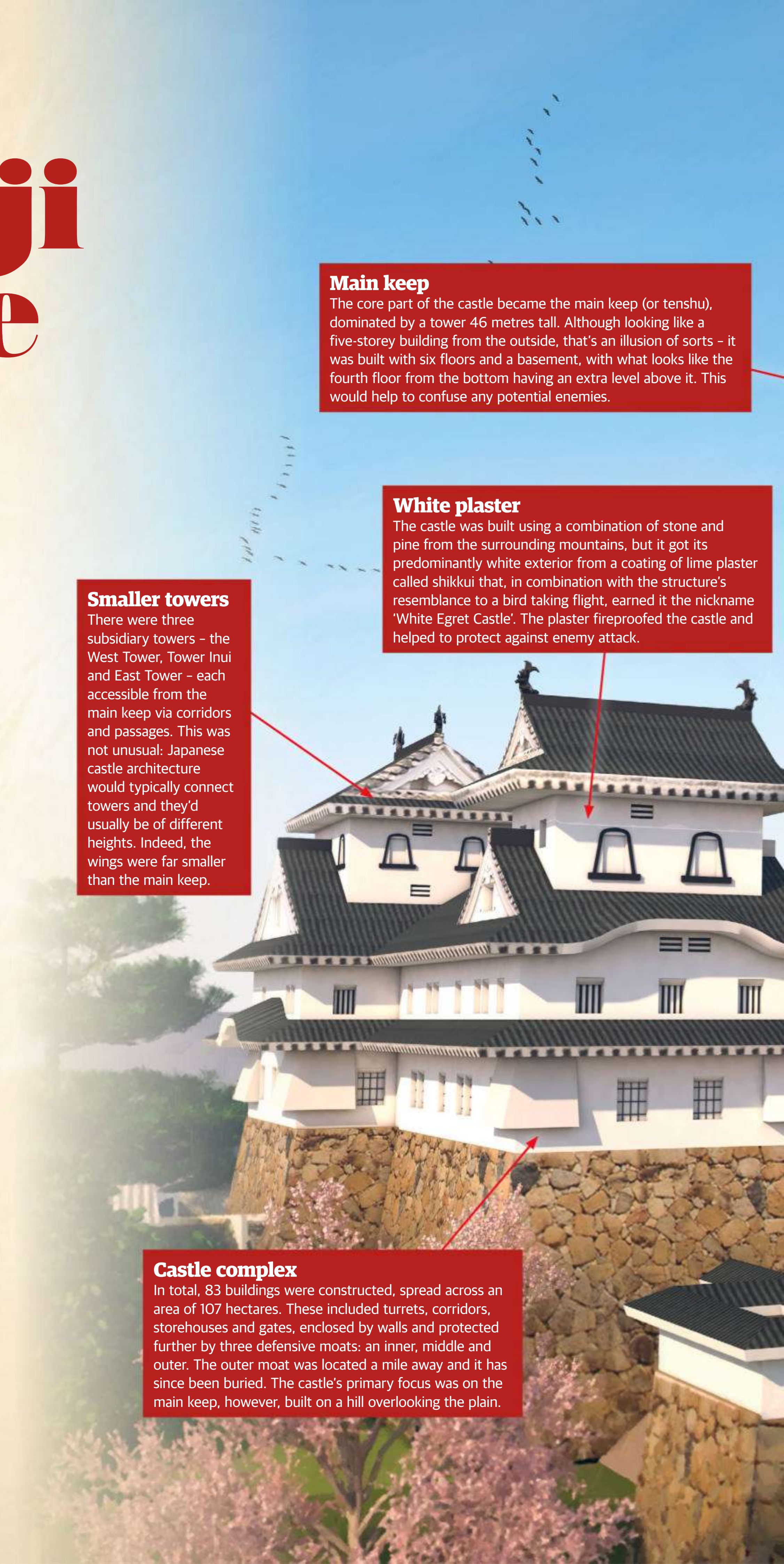
Ikeda Terumasa was the brains behind what we see today. As the shōgun of west Japan and the son-in-law of the Japanese warrior and statesman Tokugawa Ieyasu, he was handed the castle in 1600 as a reward for his support in the Battle of Sekigahara. Within a year, he'd ordered its demolition and a new structure was commissioned to take its place.

By 1609, the new castle was completed, although additions were made towards the end of the following decade. The end result was on a much grander scale than the 16th century structure it had replaced. It was also a far cry from the fortified building that originally occupied the site in 1333, for here was a complex of 83 buildings (one of which towered over the rest), connected by winding paths and constructed with defence in mind.

There were three moats, walls that were up to 26 metres high and many heavily fortified gates in unexpected places that would slow any advancing army. Concerted attempts were also made to ensure that the enemy would have to twist and turn if they were to make their way towards the main tower, with the steep, narrow paths being deliberately confusing to follow.

As much attention was paid to the castle's elegantly balanced appearance, too. The multiple roof layers were a mix of the curved and the triangular, and the protective white plaster adorning the walls ensured the buildings stood proud. Even so, the castle has not always been appreciated and in the late-19th century it was on the verge of being demolished and replaced with army barracks.

It has survived earthquakes and the Second World War, however, and the castle remains intact. Today it's Japan's most-visited castle and a recent renovation means it's back to its best.

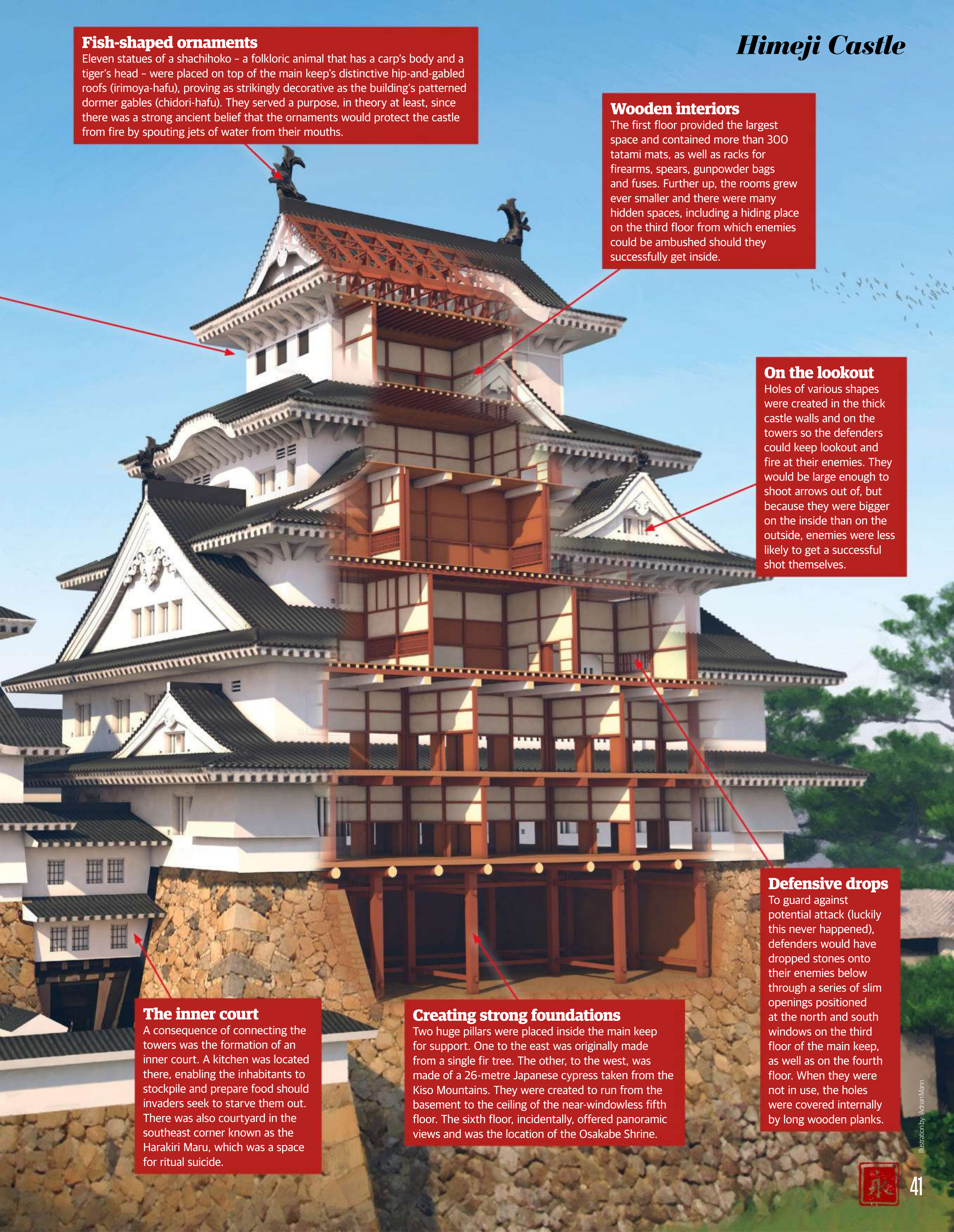


Main keep
The core part of the castle became the main keep (or tenshu), dominated by a tower 46 metres tall. Although looking like a five-storey building from the outside, that's an illusion of sorts – it was built with six floors and a basement, with what looks like the fourth floor from the bottom having an extra level above it. This would help to confuse any potential enemies.

White plaster
The castle was built using a combination of stone and pine from the surrounding mountains, but it got its predominantly white exterior from a coating of lime plaster called shikkui that, in combination with the structure's resemblance to a bird taking flight, earned it the nickname 'White Egret Castle'. The plaster fireproofed the castle and helped to protect against enemy attack.

Smaller towers
There were three subsidiary towers – the West Tower, Tower Inui and East Tower – each accessible from the main keep via corridors and passages. This was not unusual: Japanese castle architecture would typically connect towers and they'd usually be of different heights. Indeed, the wings were far smaller than the main keep.

Castle complex
In total, 83 buildings were constructed, spread across an area of 107 hectares. These included turrets, corridors, storehouses and gates, enclosed by walls and protected further by three defensive moats: an inner, middle and outer. The outer moat was located a mile away and it has since been buried. The castle's primary focus was on the main keep, however, built on a hill overlooking the plain.



Fish-shaped ornaments

Eleven statues of a shachihoko – a folkloric animal that has a carp's body and a tiger's head – were placed on top of the main keep's distinctive hip-and-gabled roofs (irimoya-hafu), proving as strikingly decorative as the building's patterned dormer gables (chidori-hafu). They served a purpose, in theory at least, since there was a strong ancient belief that the ornaments would protect the castle from fire by spouting jets of water from their mouths.

Wooden interiors

The first floor provided the largest space and contained more than 300 tatami mats, as well as racks for firearms, spears, gunpowder bags and fuses. Further up, the rooms grew ever smaller and there were many hidden spaces, including a hiding place on the third floor from which enemies could be ambushed should they successfully get inside.

On the lookout

Holes of various shapes were created in the thick castle walls and on the towers so the defenders could keep lookout and fire at their enemies. They would be large enough to shoot arrows out of, but because they were bigger on the inside than on the outside, enemies were less likely to get a successful shot themselves.

Defensive drops

To guard against potential attack (luckily this never happened), defenders would have dropped stones onto their enemies below through a series of slim openings positioned at the north and south windows on the third floor of the main keep, as well as on the fourth floor. When they were not in use, the holes were covered internally by long wooden planks.

The inner court

A consequence of connecting the towers was the formation of an inner court. A kitchen was located there, enabling the inhabitants to stockpile and prepare food should invaders seek to starve them out. There was also courtyard in the southeast corner known as the Harakiri Maru, which was a space for ritual suicide.

Creating strong foundations

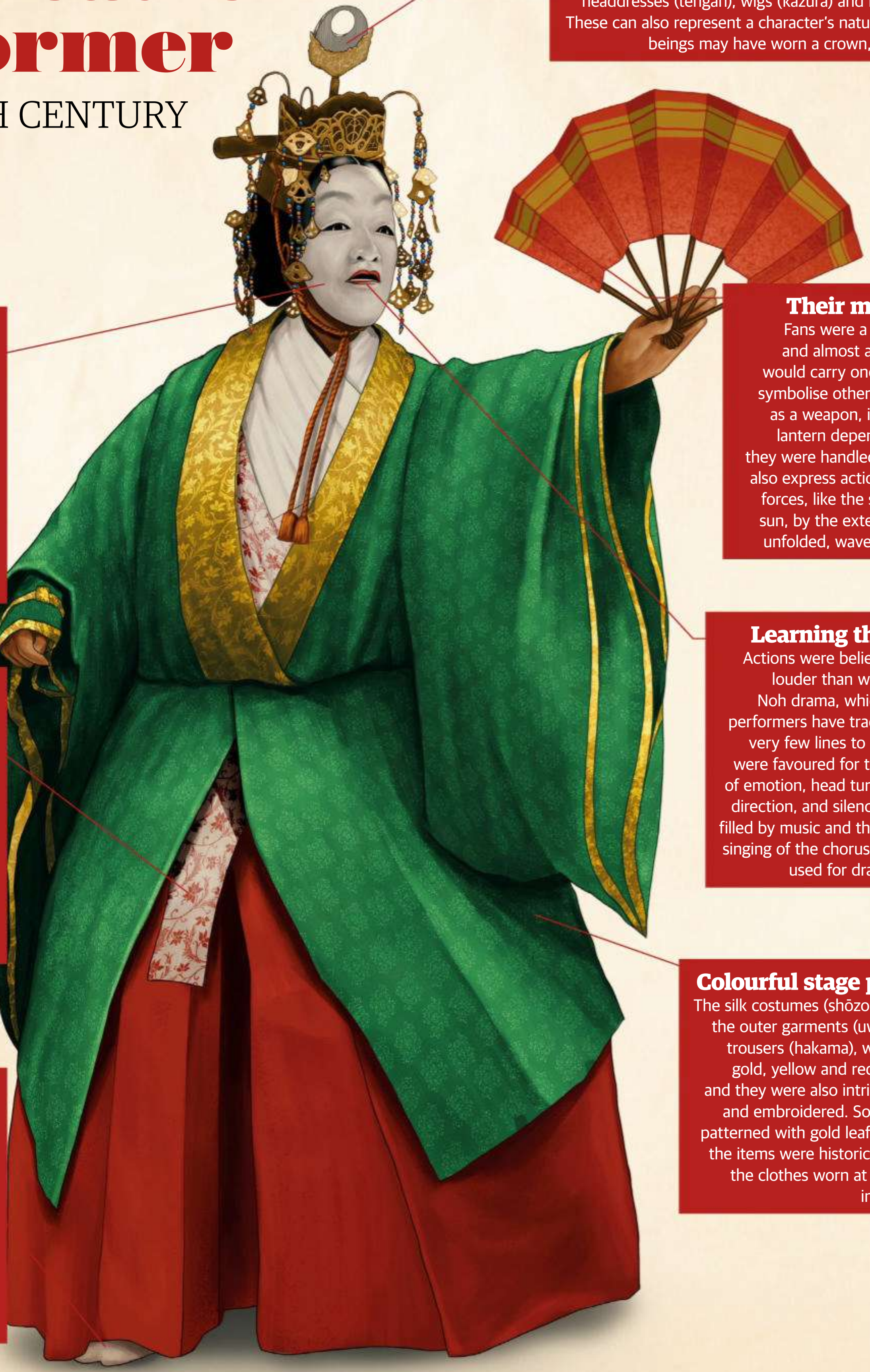
Two huge pillars were placed inside the main keep for support. One to the east was originally made from a single fir tree. The other, to the west, was made of a 26-metre Japanese cypress taken from the Kiso Mountains. They were created to run from the basement to the ceiling of the near-windowless fifth floor. The sixth floor, incidentally, offered panoramic views and was the location of the Osakabe Shrine.

Illustration by: Adrian Mann

平安清

The anatomy of a Noh theatre performer

JAPAN, 14TH CENTURY



Head for performing

Noh actors have, historically, been male, although women have also performed since the 1940s. One way to show gender and social status has been the use of items worn on the head, including intricate headdresses (tengan), wigs (kazura) and hats (eboshi). These can also represent a character's nature – heavenly beings may have worn a crown, for instance.

Facing the audience

Masks carved from blocks of Japanese cypress were worn by a Noh drama's main performers to represent characters such as demons and monks, and genders of various ages. Treated with reverence and believed to be inherently spiritual, some of the 60 or so original types contained hidden emotions that were revealed by tilting the head so the mask captured light and shadows.

Their many fans

Fans were a popular prop and almost all performers would carry one. They could symbolise other objects such as a weapon, instrument or lantern depending on how they were handled. They could also express actions or natural forces, like the setting of the sun, by the extent they were unfolded, waved or pointed.

Learning their lines

Actions were believed to speak louder than words during a Noh drama, which is why the performers have traditionally had very few lines to say. Gestures were favoured for the conveying of emotion, head turns suggested direction, and silence was mainly filled by music and the chanting or singing of the chorus, with pauses used for dramatic effect.

Bulk up

Although actors originally wore their everyday clothes during a performance, their costumes became more elaborate, regardless of their on-stage role. The performers – whether the principal actor (shite), secondary actor (waki) or companion (tsure) – would also wear items in multiple layers, starting with the inner garments (kisuke), giving them a bulky appearance.

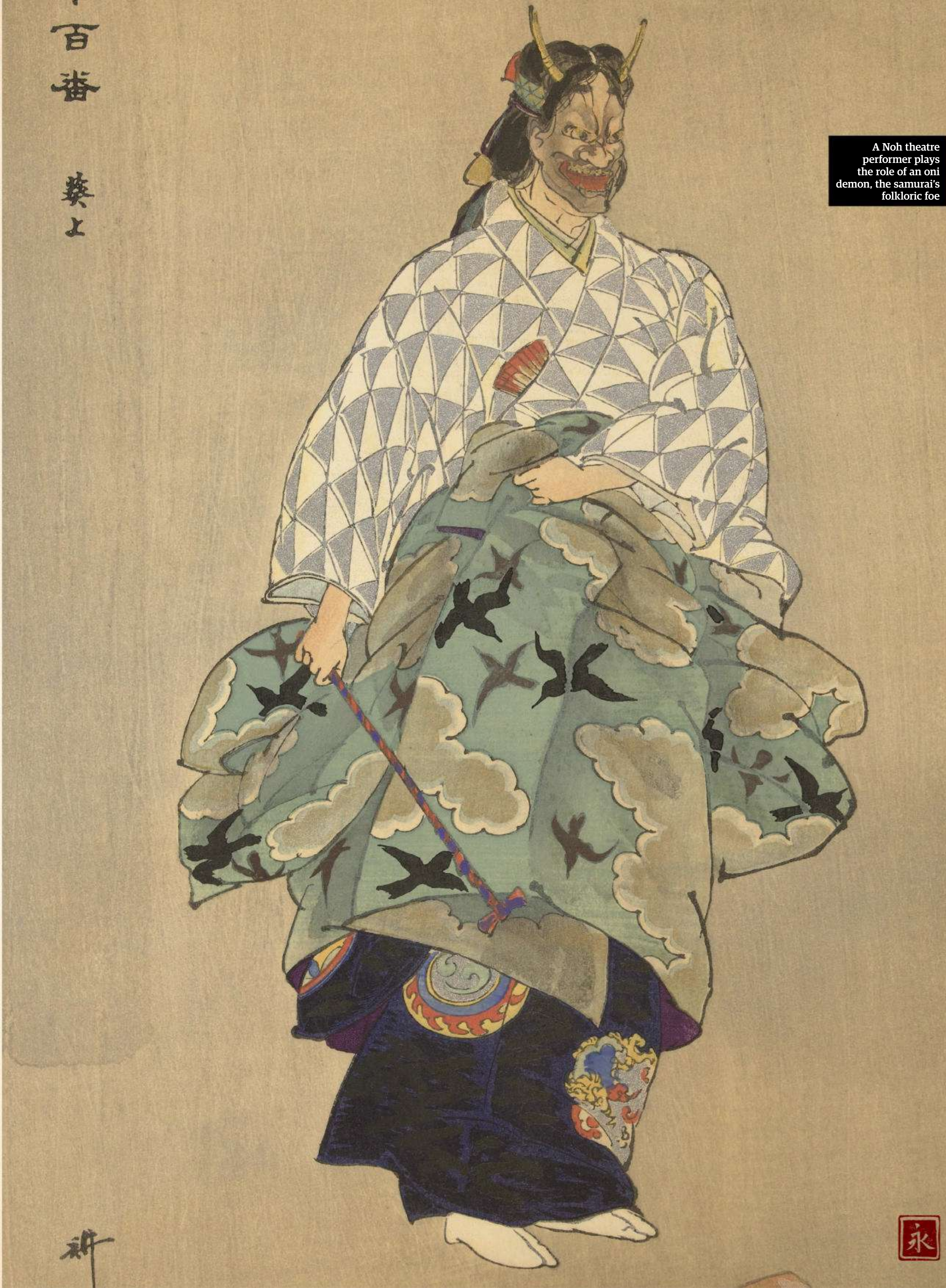
Colourful stage presence

The silk costumes (shōzoku), including the outer garments (uwagi) and the trousers (hakama), were coloured gold, yellow and red in the main, and they were also intricately woven and embroidered. Some would be patterned with gold leaf designs, and the items were historically based on the clothes worn at the medieval imperial court.

Slide away

Performers would wear stockings rather than shoes, which would assist in the art of suri-ashi, or 'sliding feet'. The actors would use slow, controlled movements to glide their feet across the stage in alternating sequences, keeping their heels on the floor. The fluidity of a Noh theatre performance has always been highly choreographed.

Illustration by: Kevin McGivern



A Noh theatre performer plays the role of an oni demon, the samurai's folkloric foe

Image source: Schenking van Kunsthandel Saru Gallery

Hall of Fame
FAMOUS WARRIORS

Many samurai, outlaws and military leaders are revered to this day for their exploits

BENKEI 1155-1189

A warrior monk, Benkei has entered popular Japanese legend and there are many stories about his life and exploits. When he was born he's said to have had wild teeth and long hair like a demon, and when he was 17 he was said to be over two metres tall. He spent many years working for Minamoto Yoshitsune, famously being killed defending him. Legend has it his dead body, riddled with arrows, was still standing as Minamoto Yoritomo's forces attacked.

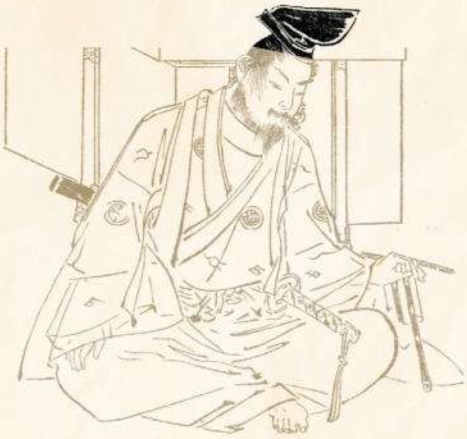


Image source: wiki/Kikuchi-Yosai

MINAMOTO YOSHITSUNE
1159-1189

A military commander of the Minamoto clan, Yoshitsune led a series of decisive battles during the Gempei War and was integral in helping his half-brother Yoritomo consolidate power. He would eventually turn against Yorimoto, incurring his wrath. Yoshitsune was betrayed but managed to hold back the invading warriors until he was forced to commit seppuku. He was then decapitated, his head preserved in sake and sent to Yorimoto.

Image source: wiki/Kikuchi-Yosai

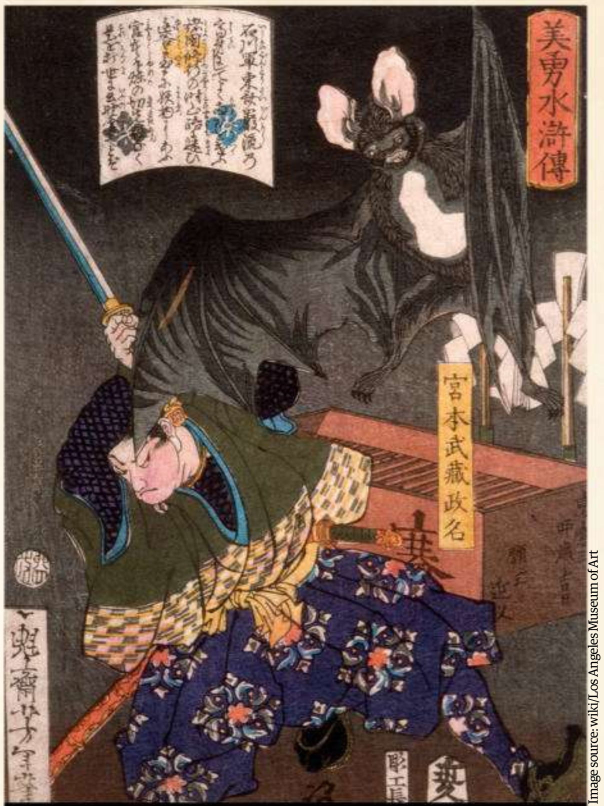

美勇水滸傳
宮本武蔵政名

Image source: wiki/Los Angeles Museum of Art

ASHIKAGA TADAYOSHI
1306-1352

The well-known military tactician is considered by some to have been a genius on the battlefield. He's thought to have engineered all the major victories of his brother Ashikaga Takauji, who despite being de facto ruler proved to be practically useless at the necessary administrative tasks. He eventually entered into a feud with his brother when Takauji gave a key role to a samurai Tadayoshi despised. Tadayoshi joined his brother's enemies before he died, some suspect from poisoning.

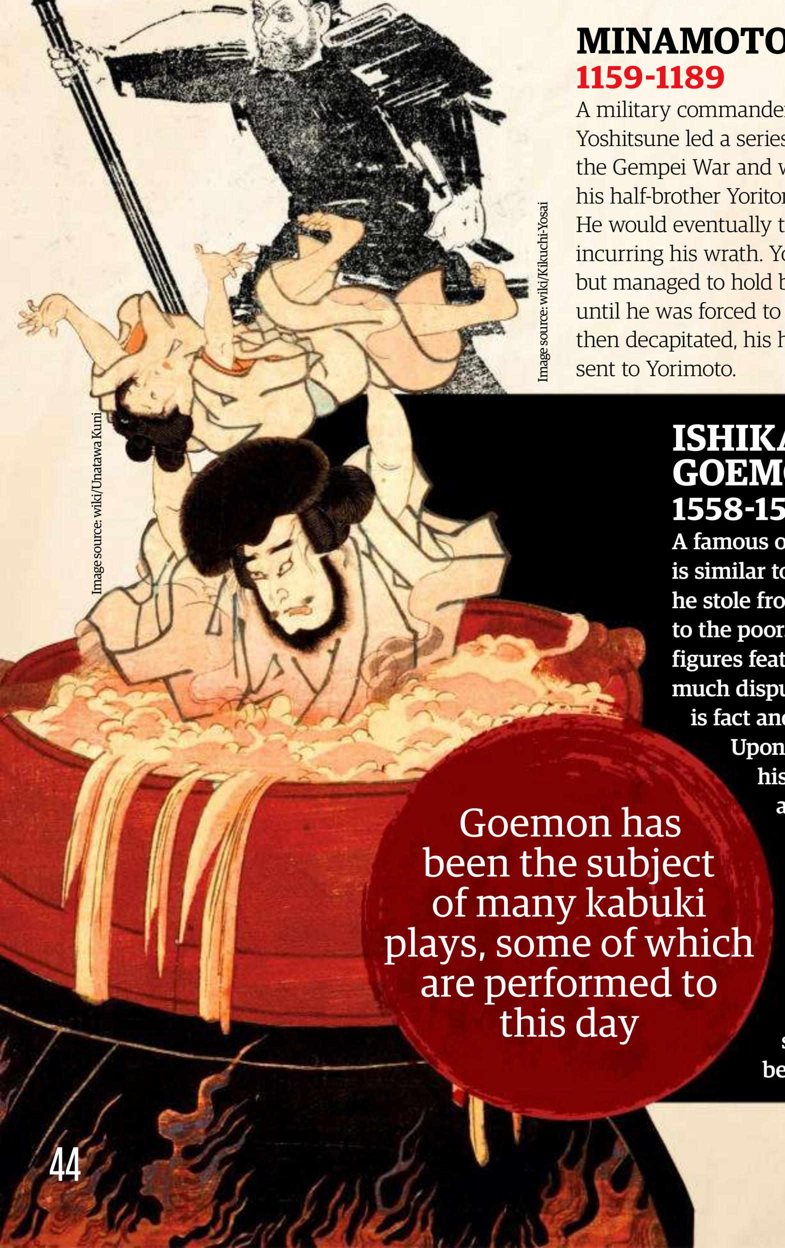


Image source: wiki/Unatawa Kuni

ISHIKAWA GOEMON
1558-1594

A famous outlaw hero, Goemon is similar to Robin Hood in that he stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Like many of the figures featured here, there is much dispute between what is fact and what is folklore. Upon capture, he and his son were boiled alive in a public execution, during which Goeman held his son above the water in defiance of his enemies. Before his death, he wrote a famous poem stating there'd always be thieves.

> Goemon has been the subject of many kabuki plays, some of which are performed to this day

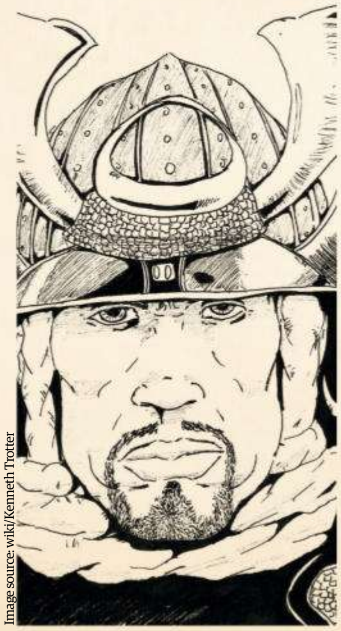


Image source: wiki/Kenneth Trotter

YASUKE
C.1530-C.1580

A servant or slave of African origin, Yasuke was possibly brought to Japan by a Portuguese trading vessel. He entered the service of Oda Nobunaga and became Nobunga's personal weapon bearer. He was given his own lodgings and a short ceremonial katana. Yasuke would have been present at Nobunaga's forced suicide, with accounts saying that he bravely fought to hold back the attackers before escaping.

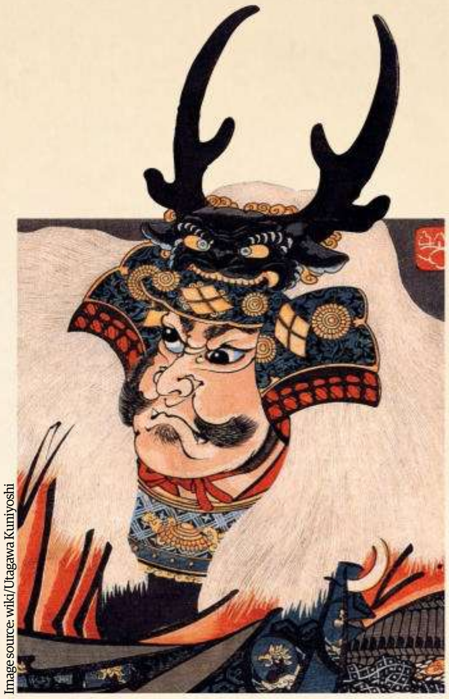


Image source: wiki/Utagawa Kuniyoshi

TAKEDA SHINGEN

1521-1573

The fierce leader of the Takeda clan, Shingen had a ruthless reputation. At the early age of 15 he helped his father win the Battle of Un no Kuchi. It would be a mere four years later, when he was 19, that he would rebel against his father and take control of the clan. Following this he led many legendary campaigns, his feud with Uesugi Kenshin of Echigo in particular was infamous. One story has Kenshin's forces clearing a path through the battlefield so the two men could engage in single combat. His influence was not purely military, however, he also ordered the damming of the Fuji River – one of the major domestic projects of the time.

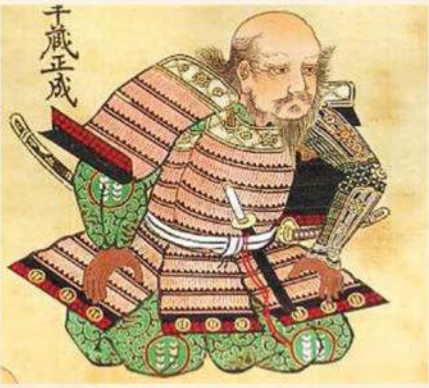


Image source: wiki

HATTORI HANZŌ

1542-1596

Hattori Hanzō became a samurai at 18, gaining his first battlefield experience a mere two years later when he led 60 ninja on a daring night-time raid into Udo Castle. Other legendary missions include rescuing his clan leader's daughters from enemy hostage takers and laying siege to Kakegawa Castle. As skilled as he was in battle, he was also an expert tactician and political mover, closely observing how nobles moved in social and political circles. His prowess at stalking and hunting his prey earned him the nickname Oni no Hanzō, meaning 'Demon Hanzo'.

TOMOE GOZEN

1157-1247

The leading commander in the Gempei War, Tomoe was famed for her skill with a bow and long sword. She remained loyal to her leader Minamoto no Yoshinaka at the Battle of Awazu. One story states that, commanded to leave the field due to their depleted forces, Gozen reached a compromise, offering to leave only after she had engaged in one final battle to redeem her honour. Riding straight into 30 enemy warriors, she picked the worthiest opponent and promptly beheaded him. She is remembered as a brave and fearless warrior with numerous stories detailing her exploits.

In 1182 Gozen supposedly commanded a force of 300 samurai to victory against 2,000 enemies

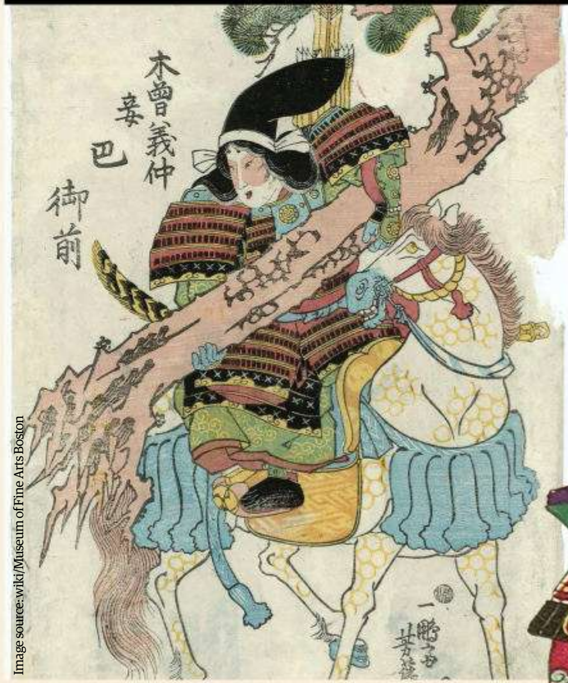


Image source: wiki/Museum of Fine Arts Boston

TOKUGAWA IEYASU

1543-1616

Founder of the Edo period and one of three unifiers of Japan, Tokugawa was a famous and feared warrior. As a child he was held hostage by several clans but appears to have been treated well due to his use as a potential future ally. He won the Battle of Sekigahara, one of the most important battles in Japanese history, and developed a reputation as a cautious and wise leader. He was known for having the ability to be both bold and calm, and for his staunch loyalty. However he could be ruthless – ordering the execution of his first wife and oldest son.

Myths abound that Ieyasu was at some point replaced with an imposter, but historians can find no firm evidence

Image source: wiki

DATE MASAMUNE

1567-1636

Known as the One-Eyed Dragon, Masamune was a regional ruler during the Azuchi-Momoyama and Edo periods. His army had a fierce reputation, wearing black and gold armour while he himself had the emblem of a crescent moon on his helmet. His vicious reputation began when a retainer of his clan named Sadatsuna defected to the Ashina clan. Infuriated, Masamune hunted him down, conquering many lands on his way. He initially refused to serve Hideoyoshi (who was virtually ruler of Japan) and arrived in his best clothes expecting to be executed for his insolence. His bravery was noted and he remained a powerful figure.

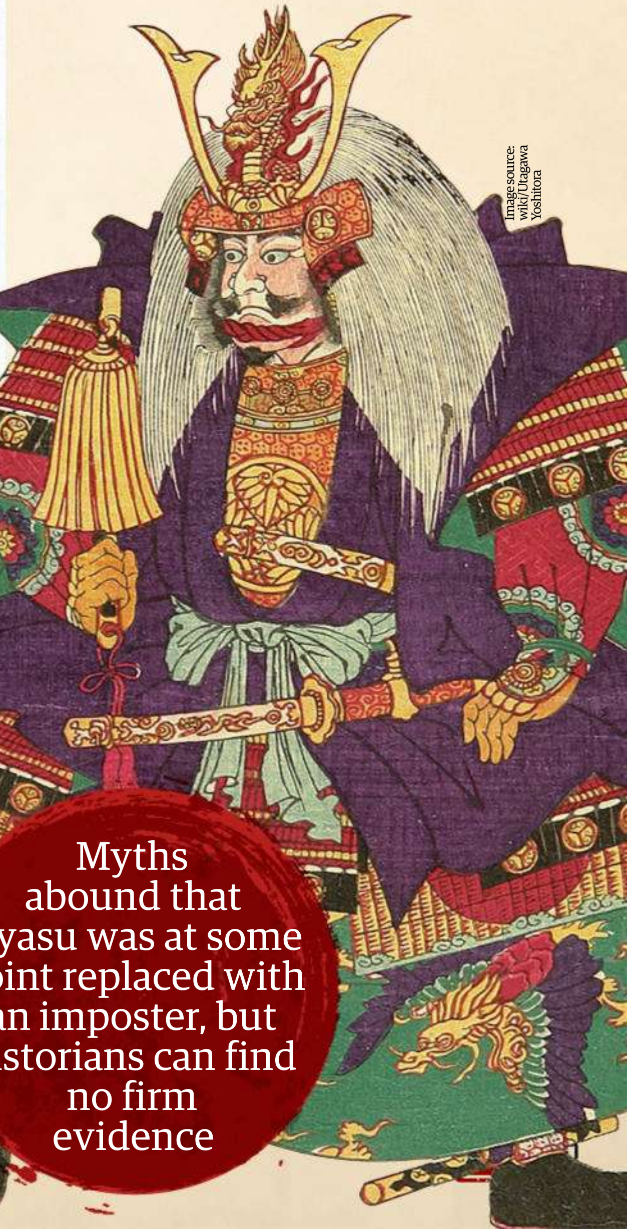
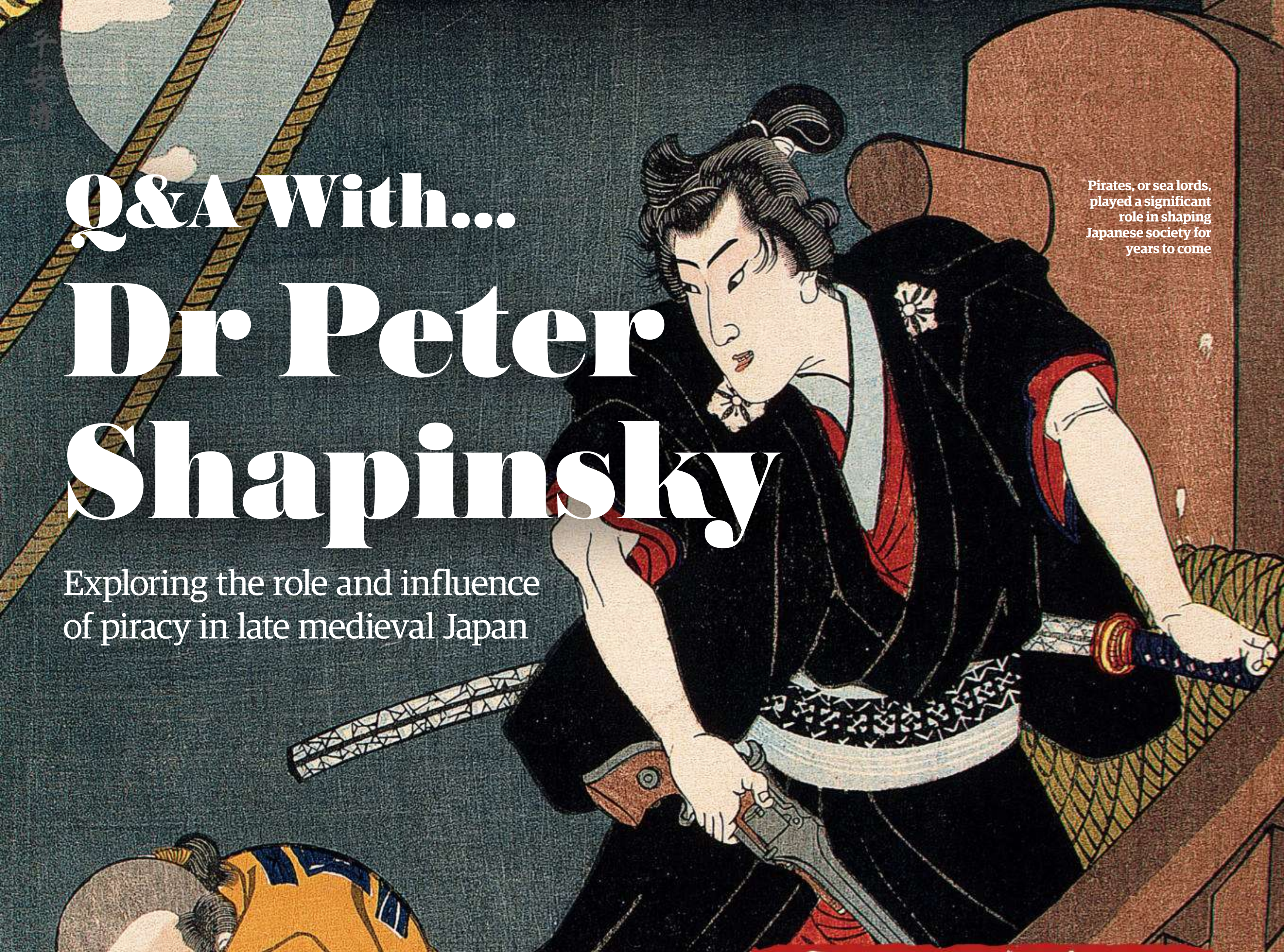


Image source: wiki/Utagawa Yoshitora

Q&A With...

Dr Peter Shapinsky

Exploring the role and influence of piracy in late medieval Japan



Pirates, or sea lords, played a significant role in shaping Japanese society for years to come

© Getty Images

Dr Peter Shapinsky is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Illinois Springfield. He has written extensively on medieval and early modern East Asian history, including topics such as Japan, piracy, maritime history, cartography and gender history.

Why do you use the term sea lords instead of pirates in your research?

Words from East Asia that we translate as 'pirate' represented the interests of land-based states, not mariners themselves. The term sea lord highlights the agency of seafarers in late medieval Japan (c.1300-1600), who exploited their ability to move between lands and cultures. Among their strategies was a choice to cloak themselves in rhetoric redolent of legitimate dominion in Japan while maintaining a distinctly maritime powerbase. In the Seto Inland Sea region, for example, mariners learned to present themselves as warrior lords in order to attract patrons and to administer the array of littoral inhabitants in their domains. These domains consisted entirely of nautical populations, from shipping merchants to salt-makers to boat people. Sea lords devised distinctive practices of sea tenure to demarcate, rule and transform their regions of the sea into territories.

How were these sea lords depicted by those on land and how did this compare with the way that they portrayed themselves?

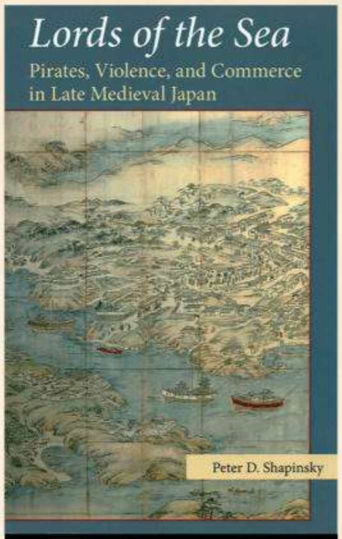
The meaning of pirate shifted across Japan's medieval period from 'sea bandit' to 'maritime mercenary' as the power of the land-based authorities to control the seas waned. In China and Korea, terms for Japanese pirate signified illicit trade and devastating assaults from overseas. 'Pirate' thus also signified the inseparability of commerce and violence in this period. Sea lords exploited such representations, developing reputations as local warrior lords and essential providers of naval services, including protection for domestic and international trade and diplomacy. They transformed perceptions of the medieval seas into autonomous, piratical space that needed to be negotiated with in order to achieve safe passage. In turn, their ability to take on different identities caused the Chinese and Koreans to characterise Japanese pirates as chameleons who changed ethnic characteristics, such as clothes and hair, in contrast to the land-based societies, where identities were stable and ordered.

Why were patronages offered to sea lords and what were they expected to do in return?

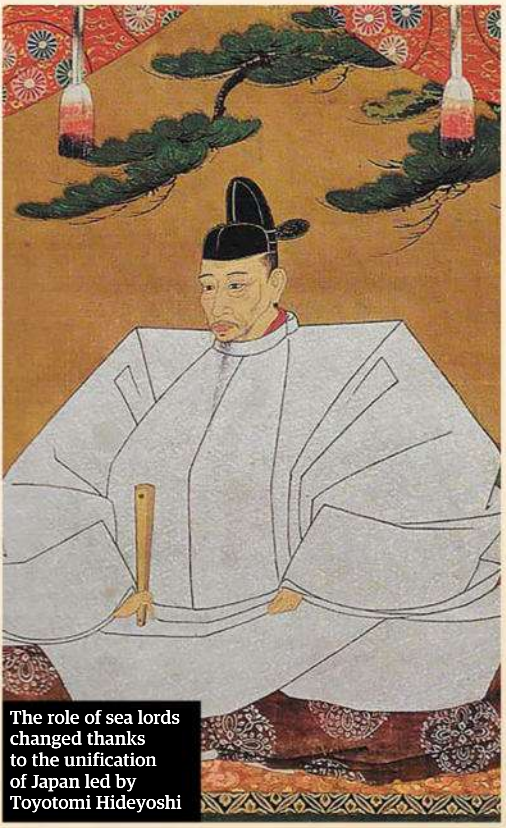
In late medieval Japan, the land-based ruling authorities – the Imperial family, shōgun, warlords, aristocrats and religious institutions – lacked naval resources of their own. They relied on hiring local maritime magnates for a variety of peaceful and military naval services. Such magnates developed specialized skills in providing such services and exploited patronage to secure recognition as legitimate rulers of maritime territories. Beyond guarding and guiding domestic and international trade and diplomacy, sea-lord bands administered island- and port-based estates to ensure rents were delivered. Over time, they seized control of these territories and contributed to the shift from a tribute-based economy to a commercial one as entrepreneurs in shipping and maritime products. During periods of civil war, they designed warships and tactics, fought battles, and ensured the safe delivery of soldiers and materiel. As mercenaries, sea lords switched among patrons to secure the most favourable terms, even serving competing warlords simultaneously at times.

How did the Japanese sea lords legitimise their control over their maritime domains?

Legitimising control required devising practices for administering maritime space to inspire a perception among travellers, land-based authorities and domainal inhabitants that portions of the sea belonged to a given sea-lord family. Protection businesses served such sea-tenurial ends for many sea-lord bands. They fortified maritime chokepoints, islands and ports, which they transformed into boundaries by launching ships to intercept passing vessels. They forced passing travellers to accept their suzerainty through the negotiation and imposition of protection payments. In the 16th century one band, the Noshima Murakami of the Inland Sea, developed a reputation and domain sufficiently extensive to institutionalise protection payments into a system by which voyagers and their backers would proactively request the assistance of the Noshima. The Noshima would then bestow a flag bearing their crest to be flown at the masthead. The flags marked much of the Inland Sea as Noshima territory.



Lords of the Sea: Pirates, Violence and Commerce in Late Medieval Japan is out now from The University of Michigan Press



The role of sea lords changed thanks to the unification of Japan led by Toyotomi Hideyoshi

Image source: wiki/Shouzou.

What led to the decline of sea lords towards the end of the 16th century?

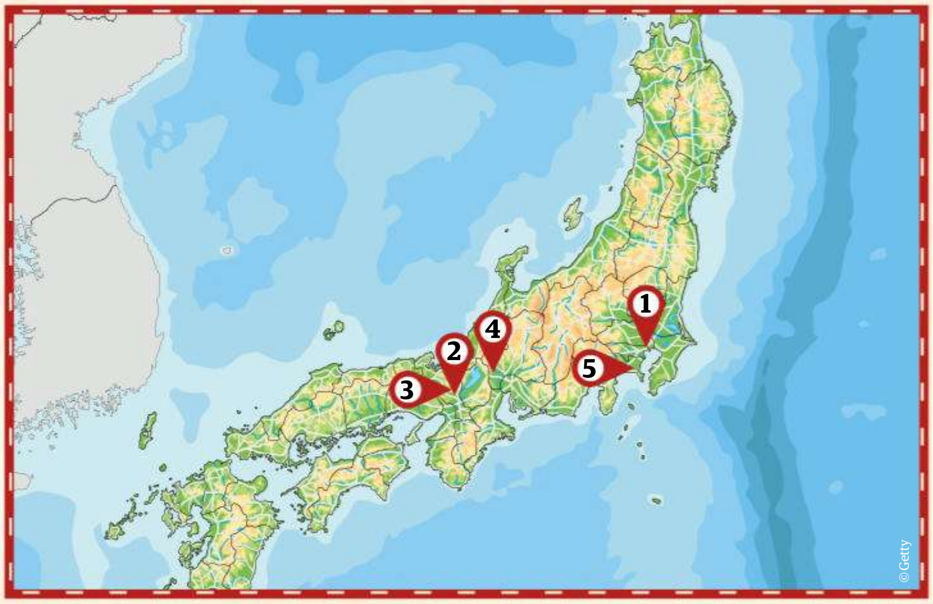
Sea-lord bands continued to expand their maritime domains until the 1590 unification of Japan by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-98). The Noshima and several others convinced Hideyoshi of the advantages in negotiating a settlement with them. By performing warrior lordship, they secured privileged positions in the early modern order as local lords or high-ranking vassals. In return, these sea-lord houses suppressed those their overlords deemed pirates, extending Japanese sovereignty off-shore, and served Hideyoshi in his invasion of Korea (1592-98). However, unification also transformed perception of the seas from autonomous sea-lord space into an appendage of the unified land. In the Edo period (1600-1868), former sea-lord houses cooperated in this conceptual transformation by surrendering large-scale warships and castles and rewriting their own histories. As a result of their efforts, the term 'pirate' in early modern Japan took on commemorative valences as loyal 'naval vassals', which rewrote sea lords' medieval pasts as autonomous mercenaries and entrepreneurs.

What problems have you found while dealing with sources on late medieval Japanese pirates?

One important question concerns interactions between different pirate groups in late medieval Japan. For example, in the mid-16th century Kyushu hosted thousands of Ming Chinese expatriate merchants who led multi-ethnic bands of 'Japanese pirates' consisting of mariners from China, Korea, Europe and Southeast Asia, as well as Japan. Figures such as Wang Zhi, whose array of guises included calling himself 'King of Hui', led invasions of the Chinese mainland. Contacts between Inland Sea sea lords and Chinese sea merchants in the courts of shared patrons, including Japanese warlord families such as the Ōuchi, Ōtomo and Matsura, potentially brought these populations into each other's orbit. Chinese and Korean literati collected extensive intelligence about the Japanese littoral from envoys and escaped and captured pirates. Their writings suggest that Inland Sea bands participated in raids and trade in China, but details of the scope of interaction and modes of communication remain unclear.

Places to explore Historic Japan

Five locations that will transport you back to the feudal period



© Getty

1 Samurai Museum

Shinjuku, Tokyo

For anyone who wants to immerse themselves in over 700 years of Japanese warfare history, then look no further than the Samurai Museum. Opened in September 2015 and with over 70 exhibits to explore across two floors, there are various samurai weapons, armour and helmets to see, with plenty of information on the artefacts and the era they're from. A perfect starting place for those who know little about the samurai, there are also guided tours of the museum provided in English for visitors who want to learn more about samurai history. The museum offers experiences including a professional sword performance and a photo session where you can try on samurai armour or iro uchikake, a traditional type of wedding kimono. (Both are included in your admission fee). At extra cost, there are also samurai calligraphy lessons, a Japanese sword lecture and a samurai live music show available. With a wide variety of things to do, the Samurai Museum is ideal for a family day out.

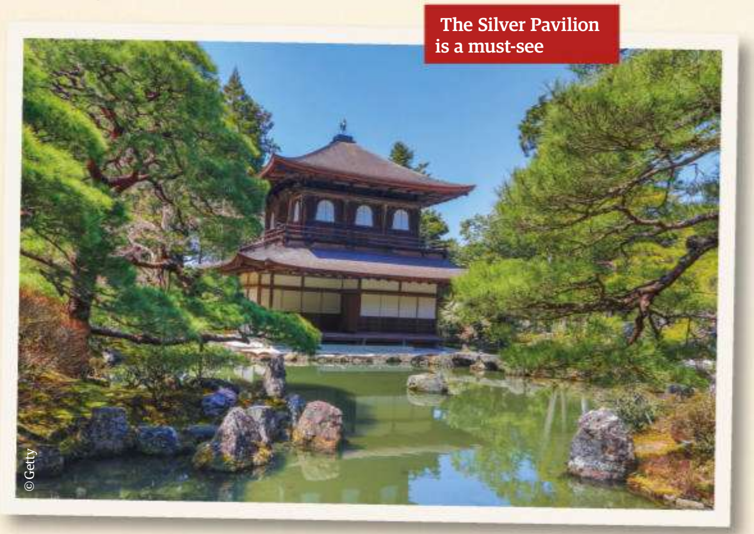
Open daily from 10:30am to 9pm. Average adult ticket is 1,800 Yen. samuraimuseum.jp/en

The museum has a range of samurai armour on display

©

2 Ginkaku-ji

Kyoto


The Silver Pavilion is a must-see

© Getty

This Zen temple was originally built in 1482 as a retirement villa for shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimasa, who was inspired by the Golden Pavilion (Kinkaku-ji), the retirement villa that had been built by his grandfather, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. It was initially supposed to be covered in silver gilt and so it became known as the Silver Pavilion, but this plan was disrupted by the Ōnin War from 1467 to 1477 and it was never followed through. Ginkaku-ji became a centre for Higashiyama culture, which influenced the arts across Japan, but it was eventually converted into a temple following Yoshimasa's death in 1490. After undergoing restoration, Ginkaku-ji has various sights for tourists to see, including a second temple, Togudo, which dates back to the site's foundation. Ginkaku-ji is also known for its dry sand garden and moss garden, the latter of which offers beautiful views of the temple and the city.

Open daily, 8:30am to 5pm from March to November, and 9am to 4:30pm from December to February. Average adult ticket is 500 Yen. shokoku-ji.jp/en

©

The stunning Golden Pavillion

3 Kinkaku-ji

Kyoto

Kinkaku-ji was originally a Kamakura era villa owned by an aristocrat named Saionji Kintsune. It fell into disrepair as the Saionji clan lost their influence with the collapse of the Kamakura shōgunate, and the villa was subsequently purchased by shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu in 1397. He transformed it into his own retirement villa and complex, with the villa becoming known as the Golden Pavilion as it was covered in gold leaf. Kinkaku-ji soon became the centre of Kitayama culture, which incorporated Ming-dynasty Chinese culture into Japanese society, and played host to important visitors such as Emperor Gokomatsu. In accordance with Yoshimitsu's wishes, Kinkaku-ji was turned into a temple following his death in 1408, but it has subsequently been burnt down three times, most recently by a monk in 1950 (it was rebuilt five years later). In 1987, the top two floors were decorated with gold leaf and in 1994, Kinkaku-ji was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Today, it's a popular tourist destination thanks to its stunning architecture and Japanese Zen gardens, which reflect the style of the Muromachi period. Visitors will be able to see statues of both Yoshimitsu and the Buddha, as well as the golden phoenix at the top of the pavilion. The site also features a small temple dedicated to the Buddhist deity Fudo Myo-o.

Open daily, 9am to 5pm. Average adult ticket is 400 Yen. shokoku-ji.jp/en

史蹟
関ヶ原古戦場
開戦地

The battlefield at Sekigahara is worth a visit

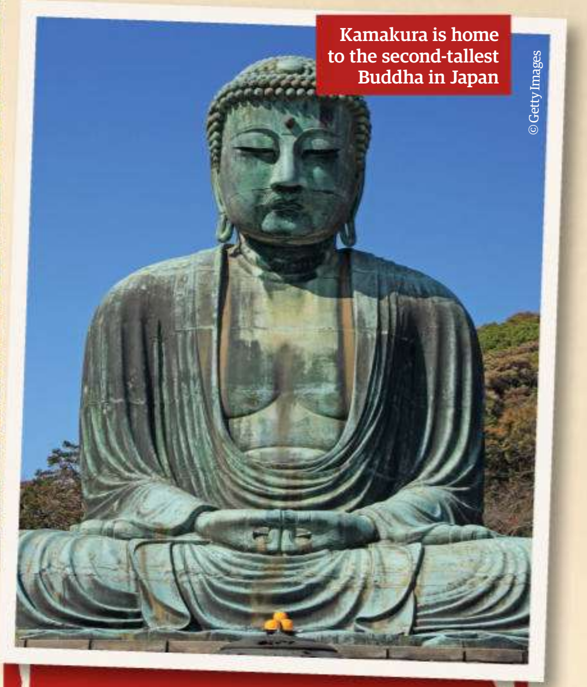
© Getty Images

4 Sekigahara

Gifu Prefecture

A visit to the town of Sekigahara is a must for anyone truly fascinated in the history of Japan. Although it's known today as a tranquil location, it was here where the pivotal Battle of Sekigahara was fought in 1600, marking the end of the Azuchi-Momoyama era. Just three years later, the Tokugawa Shōgunate and the start of the Edo period were ushered in, a significant moment in Japanese history. Visitors can explore the large monuments at the site and the many landmarks that remain from the battle, including the army base camps of the Tokugawa and Ishida clans, a graveyard and, of course, the battlefield itself. The site covers a vast area, so make sure you rent a bicycle! If you want to learn more about the battle, head to the Sekigahara Town History & Folklore Museum, which has various items excavated from the battle site on display.

The Museum is open 9am to 4pm between November and March and until 4:30pm between April and October. Average Adult ticket is 350 Yen. kanko-sekigahara.jp/en


Kamakura is home to the second-tallest Buddha in Japan

© Getty Images

5 Kamakura

Kanagawa Prefecture

Today, Kamakura may just be a small coastal city but it was once the most important location in Japan. It was here where Minamoto Yoritomo decided to base his new military government in 1192, which subsequently became known as the Kamakura Shōgunate as a result. Kamakura remained as the centre of political life in Japan for over a century until the fall of the government and the beginning of the Muromachi government, based in Kyoto. The city is home to over 100 temples and shrines, including the Hasedera Temple and Tsurugaoka Hachimangu, a Shinto shrine which was founded in 1063 – the current building, dating back to 1180, was commissioned by Yoritomo himself.

Kamakura also famously boasts the Great Buddha statue, which dates back to 1252, and at 11.4m tall it's the second-tallest in the country. Located less than an hour from Tokyo and with numerous historical monuments to see, including what's believed to be Yoritomo's final resting place, the city is a popular day trip with tourists and can easily be reached by train. Time your visit right and it may coincide with one of the many festivals held in Kamakura, some of which are linked back to Japan's first shōgun.

*The Great Buddha of Kamakura is open daily, 8am to 4:30pm. Average ticket is 20 Yen. kotoku-in.jp/en/
(For other sites, please check opening times and ticket prices before travel.)*

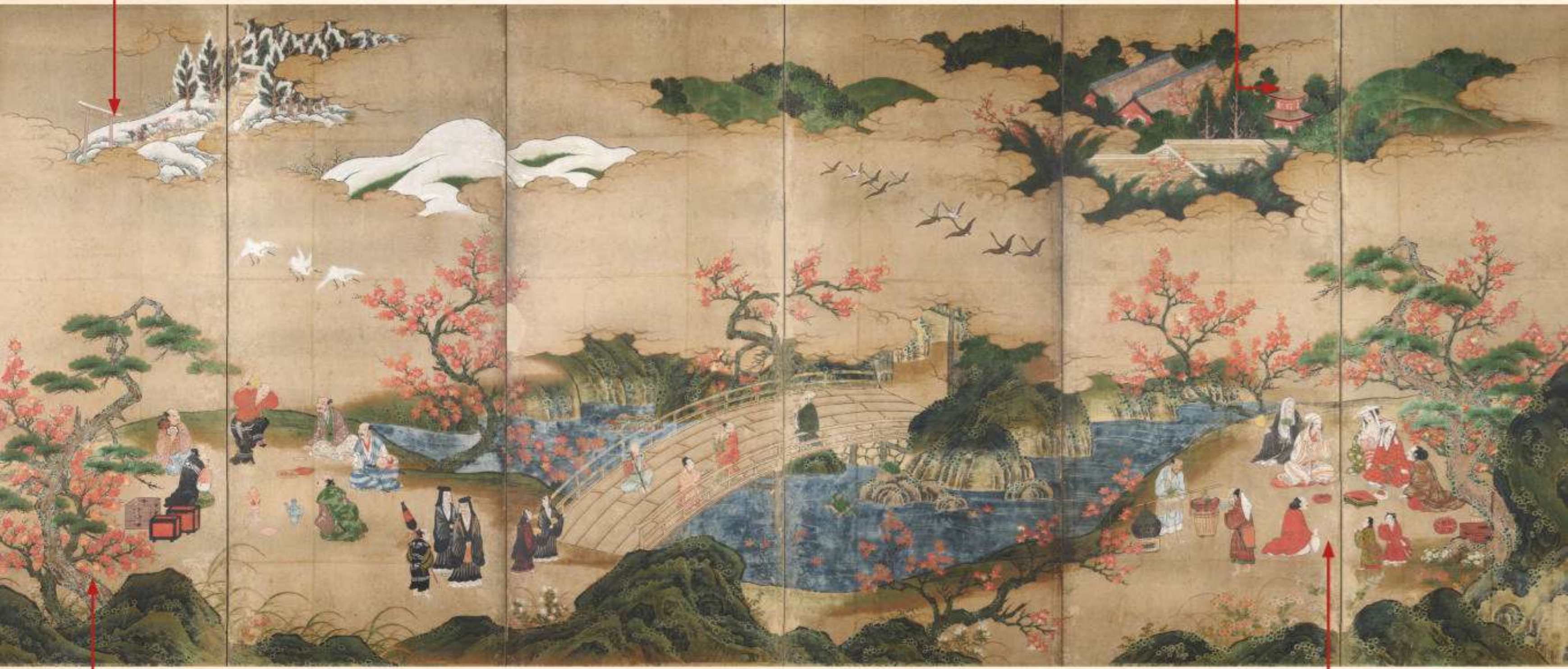
Historical treasures

Maple Viewers

Capturing the natural beauty of feudal Japan, mid-16th century

FOUR SEASONS
To the left of the painting, the gate and path to the Atago Shrine is covered in snow, foretelling the arrival of winter. It is thought that Hideyori probably painted another byōbu depicting spring and summer to accompany this one.

BUDDHIST TEMPLE
The roofs of Jingo-ji can be seen among the thick clouds at the top-right of the painting, next to a red pagoda. Jingo-ji dates back to the 9th century and it is located on Mount Takao.



AUTUMNAL BEAUTY
The Kiyotaki River at Takao, depicted in this painting, is located north of the city of Kyoto. To this day, the area is famous for the vivid red leaves of its maple trees.

TIME TO RELAX
These women and children are shown enjoying the view as they sit under the maple trees. Next to them is a man serving cups of matcha tea, which were sold during the Muromachi period.

Throughout history art and culture have been used to legitimise regimes, and it was no different in feudal Japan. Under the Kamakura Shōgunate, founded by the first shōgun Minamoto Yoritomo, art combined samurai culture with Zen Buddhism, which had become increasingly popular in Japan. This was carried on by the Ashikaga Shōgunate during the Muromachi period, a time known for its artistic innovation, where the continued affiliation with Zen Buddhism led to Chinese-style techniques and themes becoming prevalent in art. This style of painting, known as 'kanga', was often monochromatic and contrasted with the more colourful style of traditional Japanese art.

This particular painting, titled Maple Viewers, is a celebrated piece of art created sometime during the Azuchi-Momoyama era, which succeeded the Muromachi period and spanned the final three decades of the 16th century. It has been painted on a six-section folding screen, known as a byōbu, which were used to decorate wealthy homes during this era. Currently housed at the Tokyo National Museum and named a National Treasure of Japan, Maple Viewers depicts the Kiyotaki River at Takao surrounded by maple trees with different groups of people, including warriors and Buddhist priests, enjoying the view. This unique painting is widely regarded as a piece of pioneering artwork which differs from the trends of the day by portraying contemporary entertainment and clothing, predating the use of Ukiyo-e woodblock printing, which became popular during the Edo period and focused on scenes from everyday life.

Due to the red stamp located on the far left of the painting, the artist is believed to be Kanō Hideyori. Little is known about his life, although it is thought that he was either the son or grandson of Kanō Motonobu, a Japanese painter whose father was the founder of the famous Kanō school of painting. Often considered to be the most influential school of painting in Japanese history and known for producing innovative artists, the Kanō school was later patronised by the Tokugawa Shōgunate during the Edo period.

Image source: wiki/Google Cultural Institute

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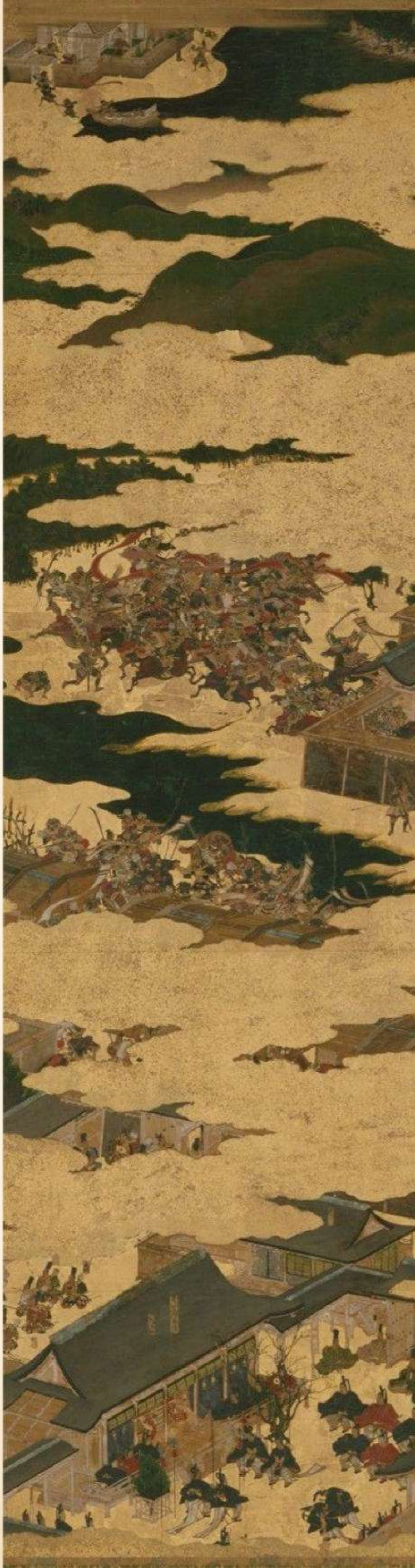
The war for Japan's throne

When a power vacuum left Japan without an emperor, two brothers prepared to fight to the death for the ultimate prize

Written by Charles Ginger



Toba closed his eyes and slowly inhaled the scent of the blossom swirling in the palace courtyard. In his younger years he would not have stopped to appreciate such a small pleasure, moved as he was by the ceaseless tides of power. But he was no longer young, and when one was confronted with a decision such as the one troubling his weary mind, the little fragments of peace that the gods deigned to offer seemed all the more precious.

His body had been failing him for some time, just as Konoe's had failed him, both brought low by the treachery of a fox lurking inside the royal coop. If only Konoe had been given more than his 16 years to sire an heir, a child that could have spared all this. But no, the gods had not seen fit to make Toba's final years easy. Japan required a new emperor, and Sutoku's progeny would likely be as trustworthy as his father. No, it had to be Shirikawa. Sutoku would have to accept that. For the good of the nation, Toba's favoured child had to sit the Chrysanthemum throne.

THE PILLARS OF POWER

The fateful choice that faced the former emperor Toba shortly before his death in July 1156 was not without precedent. In imperial Japan, fathers often fashioned the destinies of their sons. Known as insei (cloistered or monasterial rule), a sitting emperor would abdicate the throne to be replaced by a son. However, this was no accession of power, as the 'cloistered' former emperor would continue to wield power from within the confines of a Buddhist monastery.

In 1107, Toba's meddling grandfather Shirakawa stepped aside for his son, yet offered him little say in the government of Japan, much to Toba's chagrin. Having married his son to a woman named Taikenmon-in, Shirakawa left him to stew in his own frustration until 1123, when he insisted Toba make way for his son Sutoku. Toba only did so begrudgingly (rumour had long claimed that it was in fact Shirakawa, and not Toba, who had fathered the infant emperor with the beguiling Taikenmon-in). However, Toba's days sulking in his grandfather's shadow would soon come to an end, and with Shirakawa's death came the influence that evaded Toba for so long.

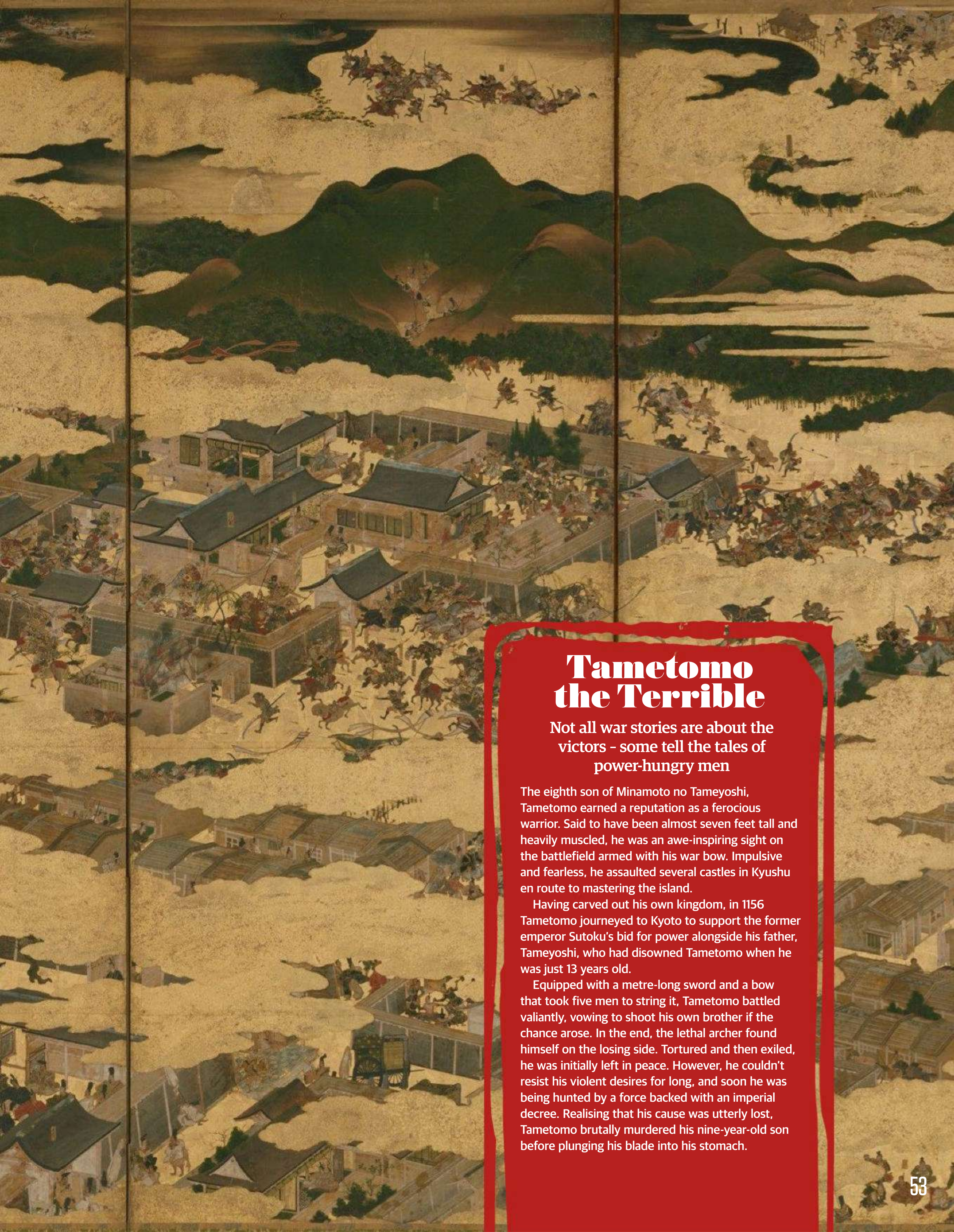
Gripping the reins of power as Shirakawa had done, Toba ruled from behind the scenes. In 1142 he convinced Sutoku to move aside for his brother Konoe (Toba's eighth son). It would prove to be his first fateful manoeuvre.

Constantly sick, Konoe died in August 1155 at the age of just 16, leaving no heir behind. Assuming that his son would now ascend to the throne, Sutoku prepared to effectively replace Toba as the true power behind the new ruler of Japan. He was therefore apoplectic when news reached him that Toba intended to place his favoured son, and Sutoku's half-brother, Go-Shirakawa, in command of Japan.

For a time it appears that Sutoku's rage was held in check, for Go-Shirakawa ('Go' meaning 'later') ascended the throne without incident. And then, on 20 July 1156, Toba died. With the buffer between them removed, Sutoku immediately began scheming to overthrow his sibling and reclaim the crown. To do so, he would need the help of some influential allies.

THE EAR OF THE EMPEROR

For much of Japan's history, a clan known as the Fujiwara had enjoyed an intimate closeness with the country's emperors by marrying them to their daughters. However, upon the rise of Shirakawa (Toba's grandfather), these mighty regents had found themselves sidelined by a distrusting new



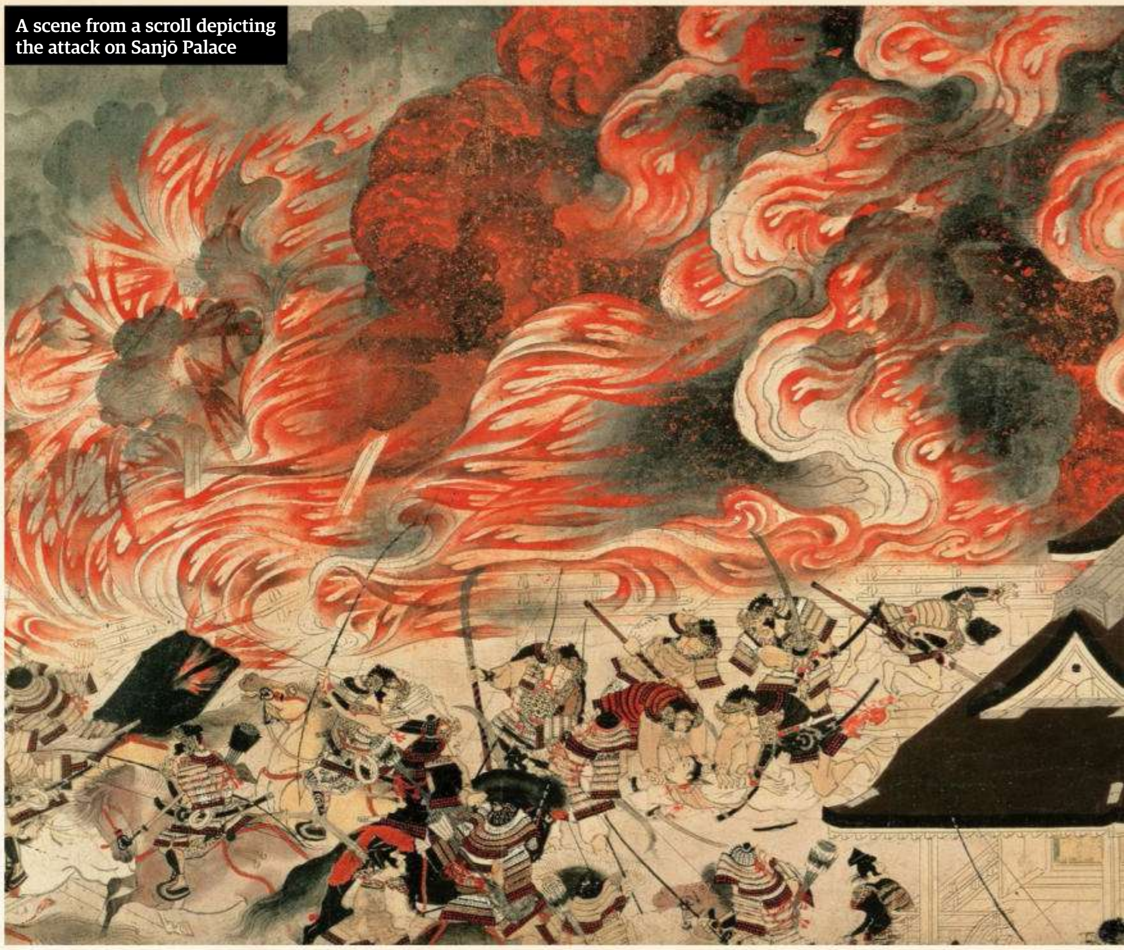
Tametomo the Terrible

Not all war stories are about the victors – some tell the tales of power-hungry men

The eighth son of Minamoto no Tameyoshi, Tametomo earned a reputation as a ferocious warrior. Said to have been almost seven feet tall and heavily muscled, he was an awe-inspiring sight on the battlefield armed with his war bow. Impulsive and fearless, he assaulted several castles in Kyushu en route to mastering the island.

Having carved out his own kingdom, in 1156 Tametomo journeyed to Kyoto to support the former emperor Sutoku's bid for power alongside his father, Tameyoshi, who had disowned Tametomo when he was just 13 years old.

Equipped with a metre-long sword and a bow that took five men to string it, Tametomo battled valiantly, vowing to shoot his own brother if the chance arose. In the end, the lethal archer found himself on the losing side. Tortured and then exiled, he was initially left in peace. However, he couldn't resist his violent desires for long, and soon he was being hunted by a force backed with an imperial decree. Realising that his cause was utterly lost, Tametomo brutally murdered his nine-year-old son before plunging his blade into his stomach.



A scene from a scroll depicting the attack on Sanjō Palace

ruler, setting the clan's ambitions back severely. Yet by the time of Konoe's death the Fujiwari, led by Tadazane, were once more in the ascendancy. In fact, in many ways they mirrored the imperial family in that Tadazane's sons both longed to become the clan's new leader.

Despite being the eldest, Fujiwara no Tadamachi was powerless to stop his father favouring his younger brother, Fujiwara no Yorinaga. Appalled at the prospect of Yorinaga seizing control, a desperate Tadamachi resorted to the most desperate of measures, informing a grief-stricken Toba that Konoe had been killed by Yorinaga (and not Tamamo-no-Mae, Toba's favourite courtesan) via an act of malicious sorcery, sticking pins into the eyes of a statue of the emperor in order to drain his life in reality. Evidently half mad with sorrow, Toba believed Tadamachi's wild claim, instantly devastating Yorinaga's prospects. It would be a betrayal he would remember.

> "Both sides now prepared to settle the dispute over the throne with blood and steel"

CALL THE BANNERS

As well as the divisions within the imperial and Fujiwara families, splits were simultaneously opening among the kuge (aristocratic) clans. Yet arguably the most telling rift was the one pulling the families of Japan's most formidable entities apart: the Samurai.

The roots of the Minamoto and Taira Samurai clans lay in the cost-cutting policies of previous emperors. During the rule of Emperor Saga (809-23 CE), Japan's virile monarch had deemed it financially prudent to demote the majority of his 49 children to the position of nobles, thereby offloading the considerable burden of subsidising their privileged lifestyles. However, Saga wasn't so ruthless as to leave them with nothing, giving his shunned offspring the label 'Minamoto' (meaning 'origin') to signify that they shared the imperial lineage.

The Taira had emerged from a similar bout of child shedding when Japan's 50th emperor, Kanmu, demoted his grandsons. It was a move that would be mimicked by successive occupants of the Chrysanthemum throne.

Despite rivalling each other for decades, by the time of Go-Shirakawa's rise to power, the leaders of the two Samurai clans found themselves back the same man: Sutoku. The ousted former emperor enjoyed the support of key figures in Fujiwara no Yorinaga, Minamoto no Tameyoshi, his son Tametomo (a legendary archer said to have once sunk a Taira ship with a single arrow) and Taira no Tadamasa. Yet while the loyalty of these seasoned dogs of war could be relied upon, the same could not be said of their ambitious pups, for behind Go-Shirakawa's bid to maintain power

The nine-tailed fox

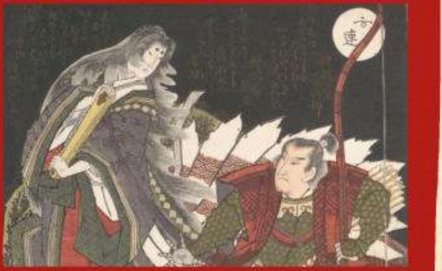
Uncover the story of Tamamo-no-Mae

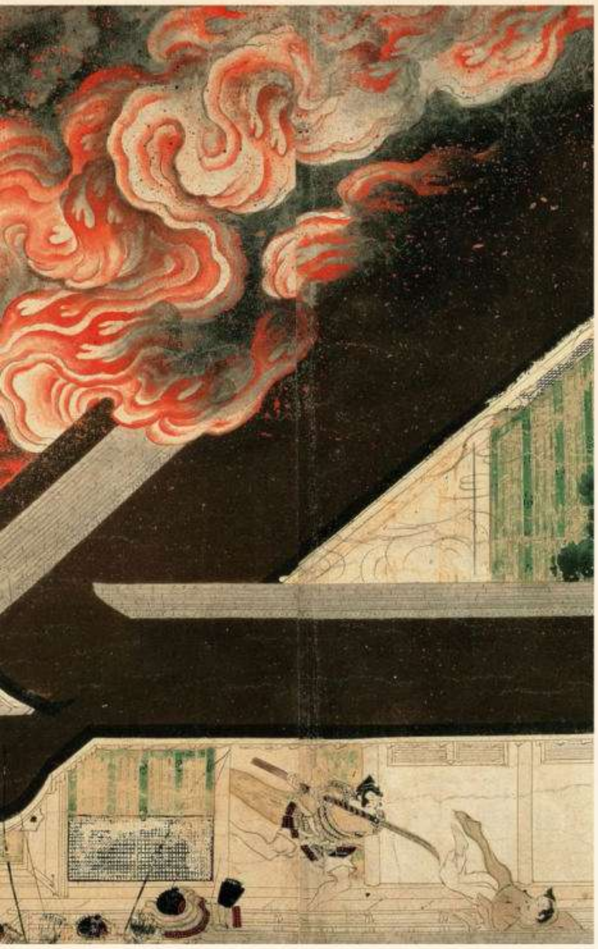
When a couple walking through a woodland stumbled upon a baby girl wrapped in swaddling, they immediately resolved to take her home and raise her as their own. It wasn't long before they realised that she was no normal child. Blessed with a razor wit and the ability to read advanced texts at a rapacious speed, young Tamamo-no-Mae earned the right to recite poetry before Emperor Konoe. Fascinated by the child, he made her an imperial servant.

In time she blossomed into a beautiful, charming young woman, one able to pass any scholarly test. Besotted, Konoe promoted Tamamo-no-Mae to the role of his consort, spending every free moment with her. And then he fell gravely ill.

Desperate to save the young emperor, imperial servants summoned a priest to pray for his recovery, but to no avail. Increasingly frantic, they resorted to hiring a sorcerer to uncover the truth. It didn't take long for the spell weaver to point the finger of blame at Konoe's consort. When Tamamo-no-Mae inevitably denied any involvement, the sorcerer insisted that she partake in a holy ritual. No evil spirit could hope to survive it.

However, initially everything went well, with Tamamo-no-Mae remaining unchanged. Suddenly, a tail sprouted from her rear, followed by another, and another, until nine red tails shimmered behind her. Exposed as a fox-like demon, she fled, only to be hunted down by the emperor's men and shot. As she lay dying, her spirit passed into a boulder called sessho-seki (the killing stone). To touch it was fatal. Here she remained until a passing monk heard her cries and listened to her confession, upon which he released her. As one of the three evil Yōkai (ghosts) of Japanese myth, her soul still stalks the wilderness to this day.





stood Minamoto no Yoshitoma (Tameyoshi's son) and Taira no Kiyomori (Tadamasa's nephew). The rebellious youngsters could count on the guidance of Fujiwara no Tadamachi, evidently still a supporter of Toba and his son dispute his lies about Konoe's death. But then treachery was rife in 12th-century Japan.

When the first drums of war had started beating, Minamoto Tameyoshi (previously expelled from the imperial court due to a mix of incompetence and an unhelpful habit of shielding criminals) had entrusted Yoshitomo with the recruitment of an army to aid Sutoku. Yoshitomo had fulfilled the task with enthusiasm – and then pledged the horde he'd amassed to Go-Shirakawa. Remarkably, once he'd spent sufficient time being comforted by his concubines, Tameyoshi asked another son to gather a fresh army. Fortunately for the apparently exhausted Tameyoshi, this son remained loyal. Both sides now prepared to settle the dispute over the throne with blood and steel.

TO WAR

Tametomo stared blankly across the table at Yorinaga, a smug expression contorting the Fujiwara clansman's face. It had seemed only moments ago that the rest of the war party backed Tametomo's proposal for a nocturnal assault on Go-Shirakawa's palace. Then Yorinaga intervened in his high-handed way to dismiss the notion as dishonourable. Meanwhile, in an identical meeting held inside Go-Shirakawa's stronghold, Yoshitomo, sharing his brother's martial intelligence, made the same suggestion. The emperor's war party immediately sanctioned it.

Riding at the head of 600 cavalrymen (each one accompanied by two foot soldiers), Yoshitomo and Kiyomoro rode to the enemy's palace in Kyoto under the cover of darkness.

The men watching the palace walls would not have appreciated the threat they faced until the first arrows began thumping into flesh and wood. As they scrambled to return fire (led by the valiant Tametomo, who is believed to have been able to draw a bow further than any other man due to his left arm being several inches longer than his right), Kiyomori threw his forces at the west gate of the compound. A fierce struggle ensued as Sutoku's much smaller force fought back. Eventually, under a rain of arrows, Kiyomori was forced back. Yoshitomo then suffered the same fate.

As the battle raged, a contingent of Go-Shirakawa's troops penetrated the palace defences and set the compound ablaze. Shielding their eyes from the flames, Sutoku's men had little choice but to flee. Go-Shirakawa had managed to emerge victorious.

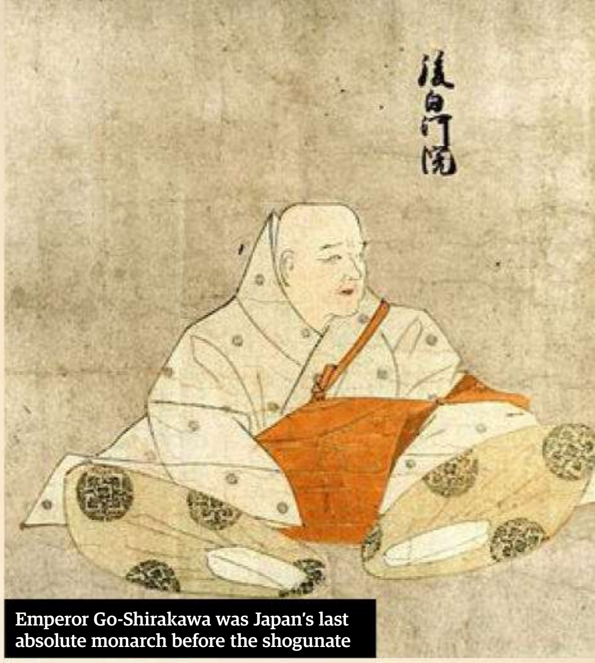
The cost of rebellion proved to be extortionate for the men who had supported Sutoku. Fujiwara no Yorinaga had perished from an arrow wound shortly after the battle. Tameyoshi and Tadamasa were both executed, their son and nephew respectively – but reluctantly – giving the orders. Tametomo suffered having the tendons in his bow arm severed before being cast into the wilderness, where he committed the first recorded act of seppuku (harakiri) – suicide by disembowelment. As for Sutoku, he was banished to Sanuki Province, where he is said to have died and become an evil ghost hell-bent on revenge.

His enemies dead or scattered, Go-Shirakawa quickly mopped up the remnants of Sutoku's army. By way of thanks, he promoted Yoshitoma to Provisional Head of the Left House (imperial) Guards. Kiyomori fared even better, elevated as he was to the post of governor of Harima Province. Go-Shirakawa had every right to be pleased, but unbeknown to the emperor, his generosity had in fact sowed the seeds of further bloodshed. By thanking the Minamoto and Taira clans in such unbalanced fashion, he'd unwittingly set them on a path to war.

THE HEIJI REBELLION

On 5 September 1158, Go-Shirakawa abdicated his throne to make way for his son Nijō. As was custom, the cloistered emperor remained in charge. Even so, the presence of a 15-year-old boy on the throne may have emboldened the Minamoto clan, for when Taira no Kiyomori embarked on a pilgrimage the following year, they wasted no time in pouncing on the opportunity before them.

In league with Fujiwara no Nobuyori, Minamoto no Yoshitomo laid siege to Sanjō Palace in Kyoto, placing Go-Shirakawa and Nijō under house arrest. For good measure, they torched the palace and murdered Nijō's retainer (a royal attendant), Fujiwara no Michinori. Nobuyori even had the audacity to proclaim himself as imperial chancellor. But the pair hadn't reckoned on Kiyomori's swift return.



Emperor Go-Shirakawa was Japan's last absolute monarch before the shogunate

Upon reaching Kyoto, Kiyomori confronted the unfolding crisis with his usual calm, offering Nobuyori pretend peace terms. While the hubristic new chancellor prevaricated Kiyomori engineered Nijō and his father's escape. With the emperor now safe, Kiyomori commanded his eldest son, Shigemori, to finish the rebels. He duly led 3,000 cavalry in an all-out assault on the palace.

Unsurprisingly, Nobuyori fled at the first hint of a struggle. Fortunately for Yoshitomo, his son Yoshihira fought back, pursuing Shigemori through the corridors of a now blazing palace while the Samurai sons duelled a savage battle raged beyond the walls. As both sides slashed and shot at each other, Kiyomori effected a feigned withdrawal in order to lure the Minamoto soldier out into the open. His ploy worked, allowing a detachment of Taira troops to occupy the royal compound. Cut off, the Minamoto rushed Kiyomori's position but were beaten back. Their lines soon buckled as panicked men quit the field.

Yoshitomo died likewise, making it as far as Owari Province before his retainer tired of his company and killed him while he was taking a bath. Two of Yoshitomo's sons followed him into the afterlife, including Yoshihira, but three were spared, among them a boy named Yoritomo, who, 25 years later, would establish the Kamakura shogunate, the first to rule Japan. Minamoto territories and wealth were snatched by a vengeful Kiyomori, who then formed the country's first samurai-dominated government.

The legacy of the Heiji disturbance was far more important in determining Japan's trajectory than the event itself. A simmering rivalry between the two most formidable Samurai clans had boiled over once more into open war, and it wouldn't be for the last time.

In 1180 the clans would clash again in the Genpei War, a conflict that would result in one dynasty standing on the ashes of the other and change the way in which Japan was ruled for centuries. Only one thing was certain in the wake of the Heiji rebellion: Japan would know no peace.

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The Way of the Warrior

Cultivated over centuries, the samurai developed a philosophy where honour, loyalty, discipline and a noble death were more important than life itself

Written by Hareth Al Bustani

Few acts better encapsulate the spirit of the samurai than the ritualistic form of suicidal belly-cutting, known as seppuku, or harakiri. The ultimate extension of martial virtue, honour suicide formed a thread of DNA, was woven through the gradual development of samurai culture. It represented an embrace of an agonising death over dishonour, an oath of loyalty to one's lord unto the grave, and the ultimate form of discipline.

The act was also incredibly subjective in intent; for those who had disgraced themselves, it was a grotesque form of baptism by pain, through which warriors could purify their transgressions. Like Cato, who killed himself to deny Julius Caesar the satisfaction of pardoning him, it was also practised as a form of protest.

Ritualistic suicide in Japan can be traced back to the act of junshi – a form of 'voluntary' human sacrifice, where servants were buried alive alongside their dead masters. Although junshi was outlawed in 646, it reared its head again just three years later, when a prominent official, Soga Kurayamada, was falsely accused of plotting to kill his son-in-law.

Denied the opportunity to defend his honour, he proved his innocence by strangling himself inside a temple he had built for the emperor. In a show of solidarity, his wife, children and servants followed suit. Yet, although Kurayamada certainly died like a true samurai, his example was merely a prelude of things to come. The samurai order did not begin taking shape until the Heian era, particularly with the rise of the man dubbed the 'first samurai', Taira no Masakado.

The most renowned warrior, or 'tsuwamono', of his time, after defeating his rival family members, he broke out in rebellion, declaring himself the 'New Emperor'. When his own brother denounced him for acting against the Mandate of Heaven, he spat back: "Our age dictates that those who are victorious become rulers". In other words, power was not a self-justifying force, but waiting to be grabbed by whoever was bold enough to seize it.

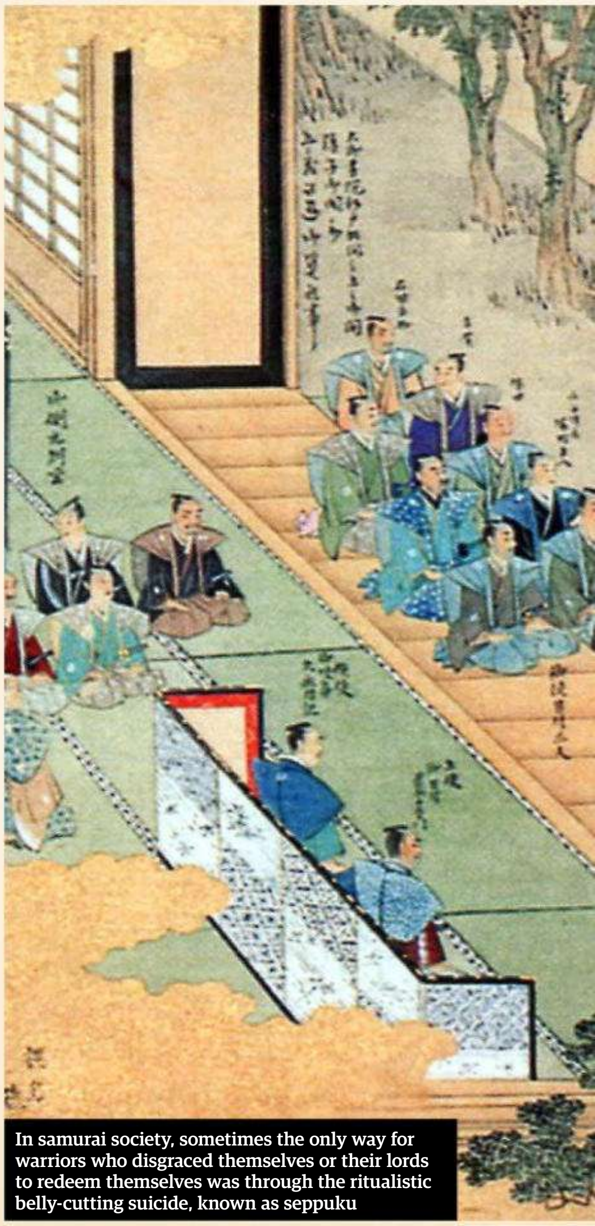
Despite committing an egregious crime in rebelling against the emperor, Masakado legitimised his power-grab with a sort of Robin Hood reputation. On one occasion, when ordered to arrest an outlaw, he refused, proclaiming it his duty to protect the weak against the strong.

After capturing one of his rival uncles, he allowed him to escape unharmed – lest he break the social taboo of slaying a family member. That same uncle went on to attack Masakado, erecting images of his father and grandfather at the front of his army, knowing that Masakado's men would be reluctant to attack images of his ancestors. Coupled with his martial prowess, this reputation drew 5,000 soldiers to his banner like moths to the flame.

Simultaneously, on the opposite end of the archipelago, the governor-turned-pirate king Fujiwara no Sumitomo began raiding the Inland Sea with a fleet of fishermen and seamen. When offered a senior post in return for peace, he refused, capturing a vice-governor and cutting off his ears and nose. Although both rebellions were eventually quashed, their violent obstinance had a seismic impact on the emerging proto-samurai philosophy – raising dangerous questions about the role of the warrior, and the nature of loyalty.

In the mid-12th century, as power shifted into the hands of the royal offshoot clans, the Taira and Minamoto, the nature of loyalty became increasingly complicated. When the Taira-backed emperor went to war with his brother, Minamoto no Yoshitomo sided with the emperor, against his own father. However, when ordered to execute his father, Yoshitomo refused. Instead he left the task to one of his officers, who later committed suicide in shame.

Decades later, yet another Minamoto clan member broke out in revolt, this time triggering a wider civil war. Although recently retired 74-year-



In samurai society, sometimes the only way for warriors who disgraced themselves or their lords to redeem themselves was through the ritualistic belly-cutting suicide, known as seppuku old poet Minamoto no Yorimasa had previously sided with the Taira, when the Taira leader's son stole his own son's horse – and mockingly named it after him – honour dictated that he seek vengeance. Joined by just a few hundred followers, he mounted a suicidal last stand at the Battle of Uji, where, as his men held the attackers back, Yorimasa calmy knelt down and wrote a final poem on his fan: "Like a fossil tree from which we gather no flowers, sad has been my life, no fruit to produce." With that, he calmly removed his dagger and carved open his own belly; ordering his men to cut off his head and throw it in the river, denying the enemy a coveted trophy.

Thus the tone was set. Although the subsequent Genpei War only lasted five years, it dragged the entire realm into a great bloodletting of violence, creating a crucible in which the emerging warrior class known as the samurai finally formed a unique identity of their own. The victorious Minamoto not only wiped out the Taira but relegated the emperor to a figurehead, establishing a new order, known as the bakufu, or 'tent government'. Henceforth, the ruling clan leader would serve as a military dictator known as shogun, who presided over a new feudal system, splintered into a network of provincial lords, clans and vassals. The samurai were now the ruling class in an intricate hierarchy in which loyalty to one's feudal lord was paramount.

"The emerging warrior class known as the samurai finally formed a unique identity of their own"

However, one of the shogun's first acts was to betray his half-brother, the hero Minamoto no Yoshitsune. Yoshitsune's most-trusted general, Benkei, single-handedly staved off the attackers, buying his master enough time to kill his own family before committing seppuku, declaring it more noble to die by his own hand than by that of an obscure soldier. Yoshitsune stabbed himself under his left nipple, "stretched the incision in three directions" and ripped out his intestines. Japan's quintessential samurai, his death raised the bar for all future acts of seppuku.

One can scarcely imagine the willpower, or ideology, that would drive a sane man to leave the world in so gruesome a manner, and to violate every war-hardened survival instinct. Like his fellow Genpei War samurai, Yoshitsune's philosophy brought together elements of the indigenous Shinto faith with Buddhist and Confucian values; such as accepting one's lot in life, and duty to one's superiors. The warriors infused these values and teachings with a deeply martial mentality, which saw death not as an

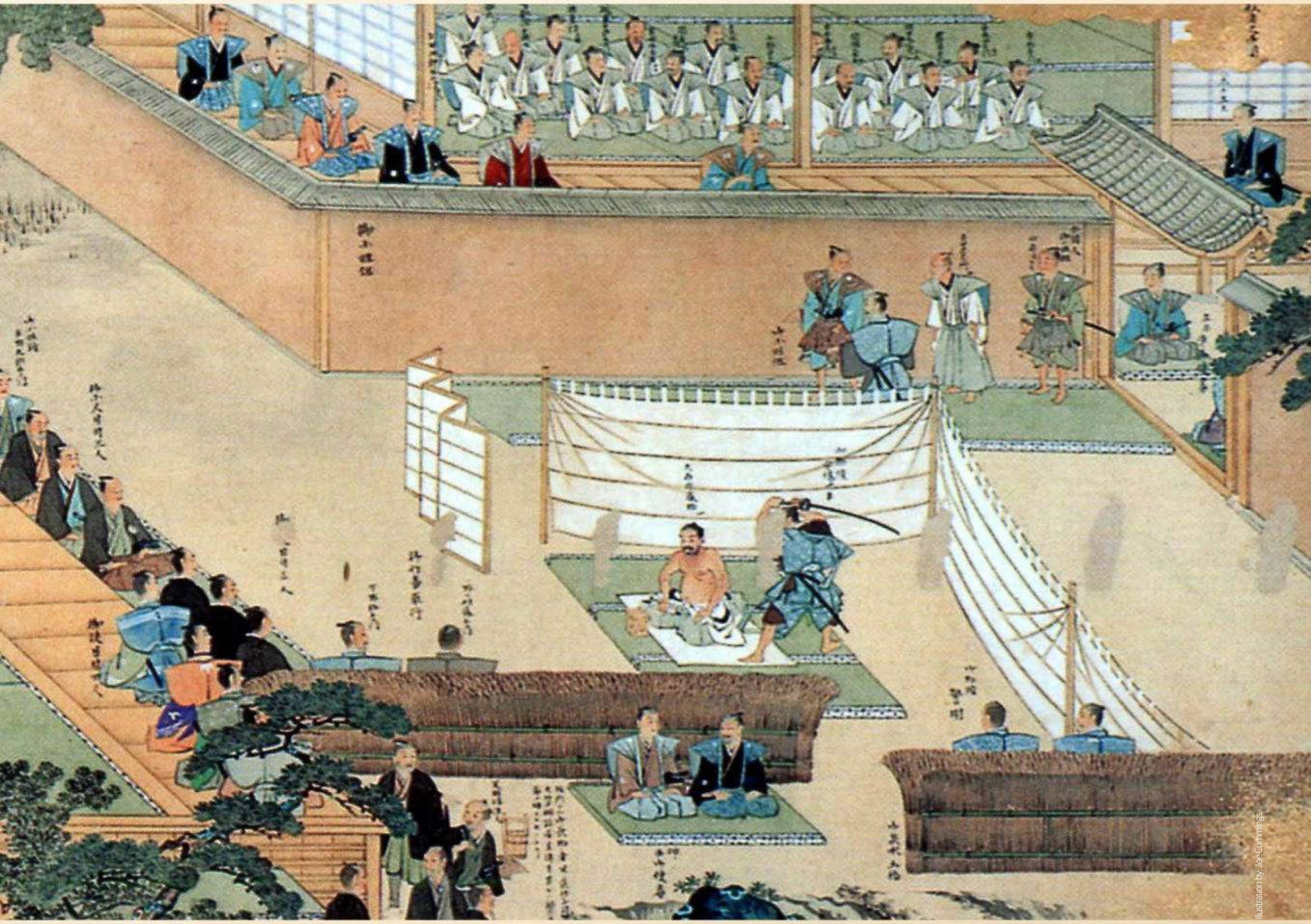
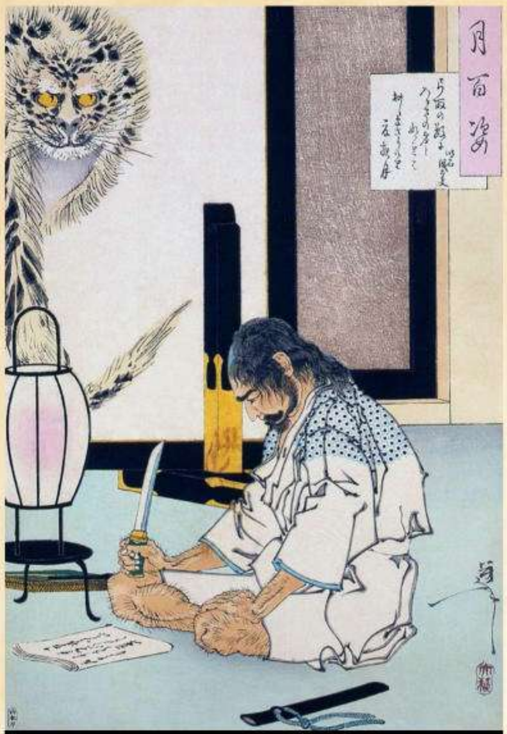


Illustration by Joe Cummings



Before going into a particularly risky battle, or committing suicide, more literate samurai might write a death poem

end, but as a transition. From childhood, they were raised to devote themselves entirely to the principles of loyalty, honour and courage.

In a world where loyalty to one's master was the most defining role of one's life, the loss of a lord was tantamount to spiritual death. After the death of Kiso no Yoshinaka, one of his followers clenched a sword between his teeth and jumped headfirst from his horse onto the frozen ground below. When the ruling Hōjō clan were defeated in a civil war in 1333, the leader Hōjō Nakatoki gathered 500 of his warriors and apologised for being unable to repay their loyalty – "I shall kill myself for your sakes, requiting in death the favours received in life" – before committing seppuku. Alongside the Hōjō leadership, around 6,000 clansmen followed suit in an act of mass honour suicide.

In 1441, when Akamatsu Mitsusuke was attacked with a huge force for murdering the shogun, rather than fight a losing battle, his men committed mass suicide. One of them, Asaka, jumped down from a tower, butchered numerous enemies, climbed back up and roared: "Weaklings, watch me cut my stomach and I will show you how it is done!" He then maniacally hurled his guts over the enemy, set fire to his lord's room, slit his throat and crawled onto his master's corpse to die.

"These masterless samurai found themselves unemployed, desperately searching for work or food"

When the Samurai were not ripping out their guts, they embraced the finer pleasures of high culture. While poetry had always been a celebrated pursuit, even the gruff Hideyoshi could appreciate Sen Rikyu's mastery of the Zen Buddhism-inspired tea ceremony – making him the tea master of Japan, before ordering him to commit suicide in a fit of paranoia. While many of Buddhism's major tenets may have long been lost to the ultraviolence of samurai society, the tea ceremony offered grizzled samurai a rare opportunity to bask in peace. Sen Rikyū elevated the tea ceremony to a process where the tea-preparation ritual was in many ways more important than the act of drinking it – drawing one's attention to the impermanence of life, while rejecting shallow materialism, and appreciating the beauty in the pedestrian aspects of life.

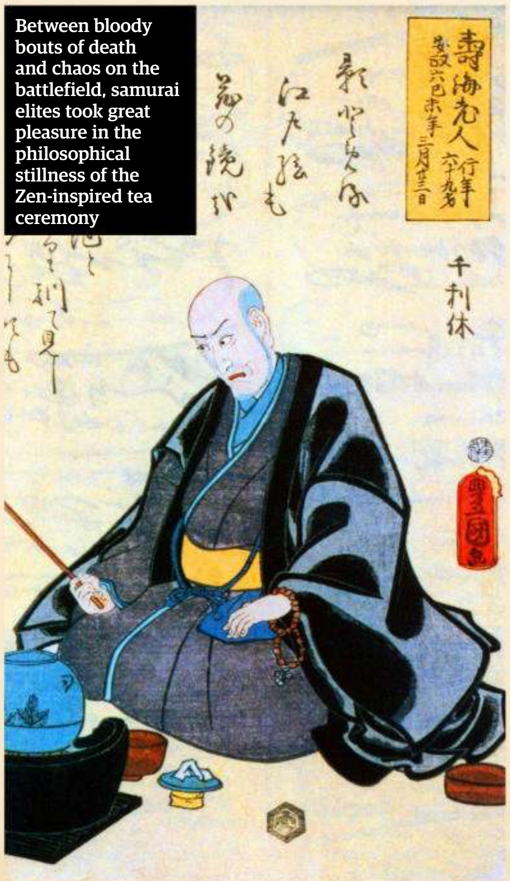
"Saigō Takamori was said to have committed seppuku, the great swansong of the samurai"

Such pleasantries became all the more important when Tokugawa Ieyasu brought peace to the realm, ushering in a sweeping set of social reforms designed to kick out the ladder that he had climbed to reach the top of the pecking order. Building on Hideyoshi's social policies, he oversaw a series of increasingly pervasive reforms, which segregated the four classes of citizen – peasants, artisans, merchants and samurai – more than ever. Peasants were forbidden from leaving their villages, and samurai were confined to their appointed castle cities.

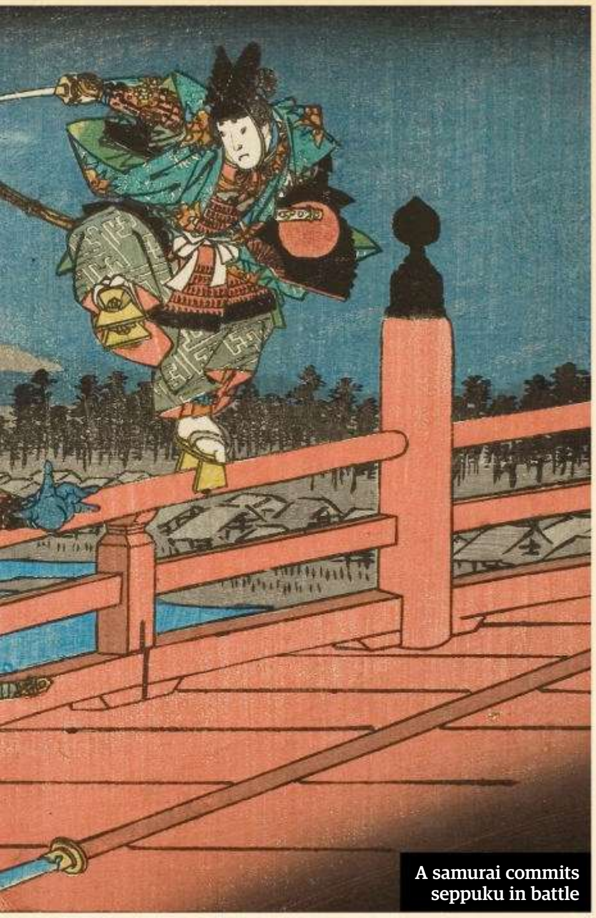
In this time of peace, the samurai underwent somewhat of an existential crisis. Just years before, they had been the vanguard of a system of perpetual warfare; now they had become reduced to bureaucrats and administrators. The Tokugawa's strict caps on local retinue sizes also forced many lords to lay off huge numbers of soldiers. These masterless samurai, known as rōnin, found themselves unemployed, desperately searching for work or food.

Among the most famous rōnin was a martial arts instructor named Musashi Miyamoto, who was said to have never lost a duel. Miyamoto was also a writer, and penned a seminal work, *The Book of Five Rings*, celebrating the techniques and ideals of the warrior code, which writers were now beginning to refer to as 'bushidō', or 'The Way of the Warrior'.

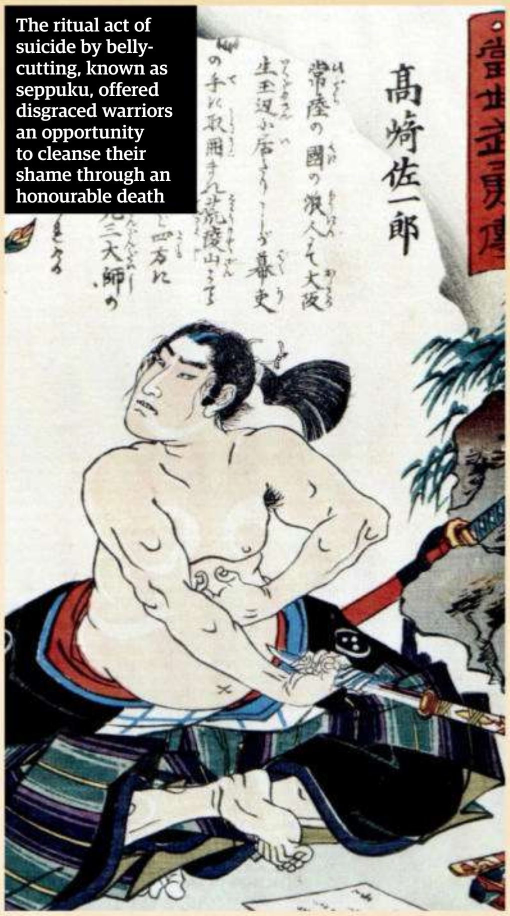
He wrote: "The martial way of life practiced by warriors is based on excelling others in anything and everything. Whether by victory in an individual duel or by winning a battle with several people, one thinks of serving the interests of



Between bloody bouts of death and chaos on the battlefield, samurai elites took great pleasure in the philosophical stillness of the Zen-inspired tea ceremony



A samurai commits seppuku in battle



The ritual act of suicide by belly-cutting, known as seppuku, offered disgraced warriors an opportunity to cleanse their shame through an honourable death

one's employer, of serving one's own interests, of becoming well known and socially established."

In reality, the word 'samurai' literally translated to 'one who serves'; and there was little meaning in being a servant without a master. While some rōnin went on to become bandits and brigands, others sold off their swords and became merchants, physicians or priests instead. Many could not handle the tumble from grace and had no choice but to commit suicide with dignity. In fact, mass suicides became so endemic that by 1663, the Tokugawa had to outlaw it, seeing it as a serious drain of labour and experience. Reflecting the mood of the time, the samurai-turned-monk Yamamoto Tsunetomo explained: "The way of the samurai is found in death."

For the samurai who remained employed, their class entitled them to a series of exclusive privileges. They were not only allowed to bear arms, but had the right to cut down any commoner who disrespected them. However, this status was a double-edged sword, for the Samurai were held to far higher moral standards than the lower classes. Any soldiers caught gambling were exiled from the capital, and a samurai who killed their parent would be dragged through the streets and crucified.

The most shameful punishment reserved for the most dishonourable samurai was a public beheading. For lesser offenses, those condemned to death were offered the opportunity to commit seppuku. The most valiant of victims would embrace this with defiance by making a second gruesome cut, carving an agonising X-shaped wound across their abdomen.

However, under the Tokugawa, the act was reduced to a shell of its former self; a metaphorical reflection on the hollow nature of bushidō in an age of peace. One's suffering was usually cut short by a second person who, after the initial cut, would decapitate the samurai, ending their misery. Some petty nobles might only be handed a symbolic wooden sword, or a fan, and have their heads cut off as soon as they reached out for it.

In one particularly telling case, after being mocked by a drunken group of footsoldiers, a young samurai called Suga Kozaemon killed six of them, before wounding several more and tying them to a boat. The authorities forced the surviving warriors to commit seppuku for being so thoroughly disgraced, while allowing Kozaemon to commit suicide in honour of his martial ability.

After the Meiji government crushed the Satsuma Rebellion, wiping out the samurai class, the rebel leader Saigō Takamori was said to have committed seppuku, the great swansong of the samurai. Some even speculated that his head flew off into the heavens, landing on Mars, or that he died attaining Nirvana, circled by weeping disciples. In truth, Takamori may have been felled by a bullet. Either way, although the samurai were gone, the code of bushidō lived on.

Upon creating a new conscript army in 1871, Japan's Ministry of War issued a set of

Masaki Kobayashi's 1962 film, *Harakiri*, tears apart the mythos of bushidō, presenting it as a form of propaganda used to perpetuate a hypocritical power structure

Bushidō today

After World War II, Japan disavowed war for pacifism, disbanding its army and creating the Self-Defence Force

Japan's post-war constitution prohibited the country from fighting offensive wars, relegating the Self-Defence Force (SDF) to a form of reserve defence force.

In 2014, amid growing tensions with China and North Korea, Shinzo Abe's Japanese parliament began broadening the SDF's powers. However, the vast majority of the Japanese populace oppose this revision and remain committed to pacifism. The samurai values of honour, discipline and martial skill remain hallmarks of the country's most popular martial arts, such as karate, kendo, judo, jujutsu and aikido. However, these are largely taught as forms of self-defence and personal development, rather than preparation for war.

Some analysts see other aspects of samurai culture – formality, respect for hierarchy and discipline – in Japan's modern work culture, especially among the country's 'salarymen'. Fuelling the stereotype, in 1999, a disgruntled manager at Bridgestone committed seppuku with a fish knife after a heated argument with the company's president.

Yet, for the most part, the samurai code of bushidō has been relegated to the confines of history. Although Japanese pop culture tends to embrace an idealised interpretation of the samurai, some – such as Kobayashi's 1962 film, *Harakiri* – have reframed the virtue of blind loyalty unto death as an unjust social contract used by the powerful to enforce immoral decisions on the powerless.

instructions, listing seven martial ideals required from each soldier: loyalty, decorum, faith, obedience, courage, frugality and honour. It explained, "This spirit made up the substance of the bushidō of old."

In the subsequent decades, as Japan desperately attempted to modernise, this new form of bushidō grew increasingly important. Military victories over China and Russia only further fuelled its conceptual role in the country's cultural homogenisation. As World War II drew nearer, politicians revived a bastardised form of bushidō to drum up ultranationalist militant fervour among the country's youth. Historian Arthur Swinson says that even though the samurai system had been abolished for 74 years by the time of Pearl Harbor, the bushidō code lived on. "The fact that the code was not incorporated into Army Regulations did not invalidate it, for it existed on a superior plane - an ideal, a faith, a creed, and a key to the ultimate things of life and death."

As a living god, the emperor served as a hyper-concentrated focal point of the Japanese spirit, to whom the Japanese must remain loyal unto death. This force manifested itself in a tidal wave of ultraviolence, driving the Japanese army to commit unspeakable atrocities across China and southeast Asia. Like the days of the Pirate

"As Japan desperately attempted to modernise, this new form of bushidō grew increasingly important"

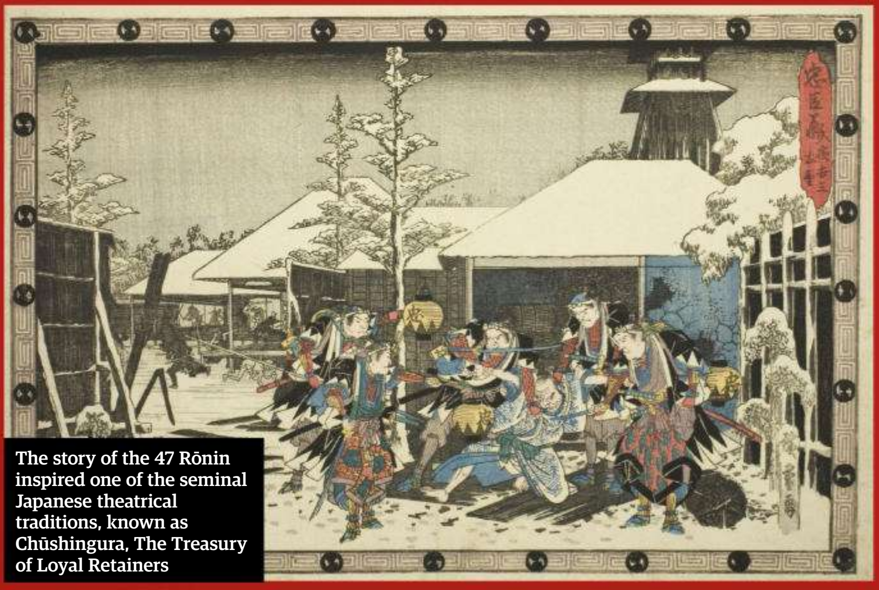
The 47 Rōnin

In 1701, Asano Naganori, the lord of Akō province, was asked to take part in formalities at the shogun's court in Edo. There, he fell out of favour with his assigned supervisor, Kira Yoshinaka, the master of ceremonies, who began to publicly humiliate and harass him.

After one disgrace too many, Asano ambushed Kira in a hallway and sliced him with his short sword, wounding him. For committing the capital offence of drawing his sword in the shogun's castle, Asano was ordered to commit suicide. His domain was seized, and his 47 most loyal bodyguards suddenly became masterless rōnin.

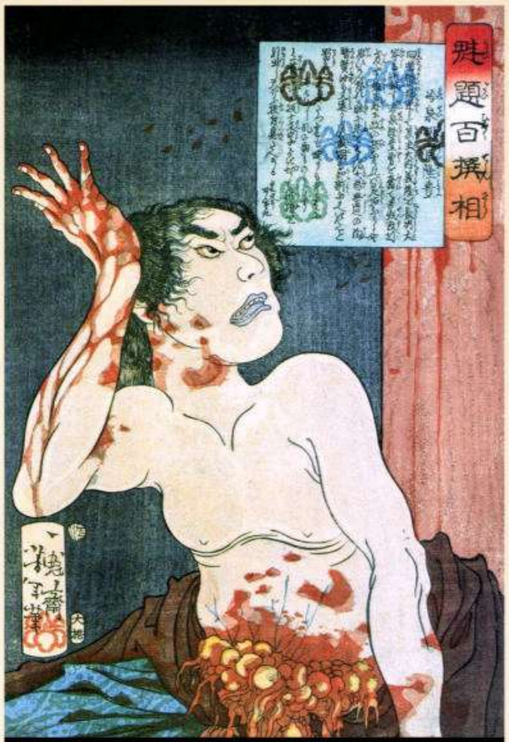
Furious at the unjust treatment of their master, they began plotting their revenge. In order to avoid suspicion, the rōnin spent nearly two years hanging out in dive bars, drinking with prostitutes and feigning unemployment. In 1703, with Kira's guard down, they attacked his mansion, overpowered his men and surrounded him. Although they offered him the chance to commit seppuku, he declined; so they decapitated him, using the same blade their lord had killed himself with. They then carried his head to their master's tomb and turned themselves in.

Ordered to commit seppuku, the rōnin gladly complied, and they were buried alongside their lord. Their story inspired an iconic stage drama that, despite being banned, lived on. Centuries later, it would find itself adapted into several movies and TV shows.

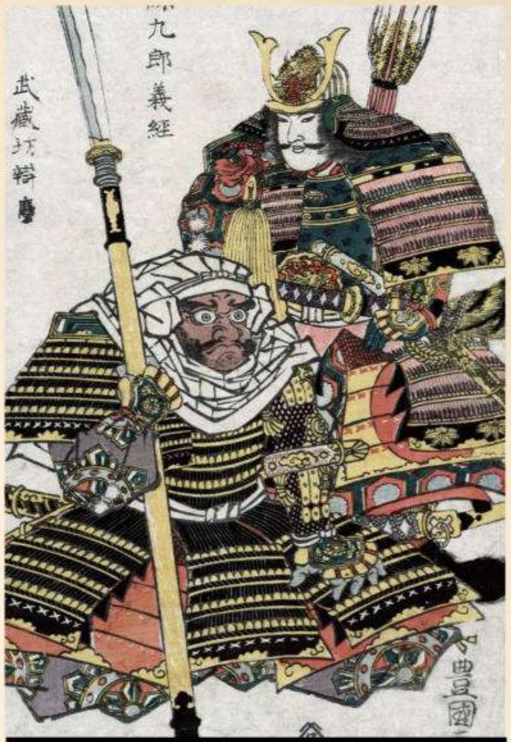


The story of the 47 Rōnin inspired one of the seminal Japanese theatrical traditions, known as Chūshingura, The Treasury of Loyal Retainers

In 1970, after hijacking the Self-Defence Force headquarters and delivering a lengthy speech denouncing Japan's post-WWII military decline, acclaimed author Yukio Mishima committed seppuku



Yoshitoshi Tsukioka created a series of wood block prints based on the gruesome sights he saw during the Meiji Restoration, such as this act of honour suicide



In many ways, Yoshitsune and his comrade Benkei, represented the pinnacle of samurai ideals: loyalty, martial brilliance and dying with honour

King Sumitomo, violence became a purifying expression of the Japanese spirit. In time, even a shallow, propagandised image of the samurai was incorporated into this death cult.

Vice-Admiral Ōnishi used this idea of the 'Samurai spirit' to indoctrinate young kamikaze pilots, who were trained to launch suicide attacks, flying into enemy naval vessels. Some young men wept tears of joy at the prospect of performing these suicide attacks. As the war turned and the Allies clamped down on Japan itself, the imperial army only became more frenzied. At Saipan, the Americans were on the receiving end of a 'banzai' charge, where waves of suicidal Japanese infantry charged at the enemy.

Things only escalated when the Japanese prime minister announced that every citizen should be prepared to die, rather than face defeat. In Okinawa, civilians leapt from the cliffs with their children to evade capture, and scores of his generals performed seppuku. Local resident Kinjo Shigeaki recalled the Japanese army gathering his 700 to 800 fellow villagers, compelling them to yell "Banzai!" or "Long Life (to the emperor)!" three times – an unspoken indication they must commit mass suicide.

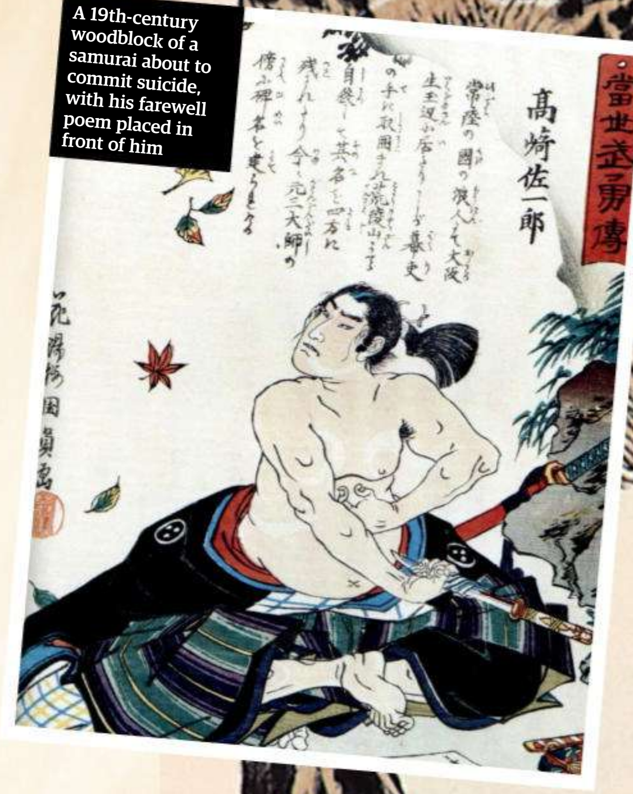
Men were handed grenades, clubs and scythes to kill their own families and themselves with. After killing their mother and younger siblings, Shigeaki and his brother decided to die in a suicide attack against the American soldiers. Shigeaki recalls, "However, the first person we met was not an American but a Japanese soldier. We were shocked and wondered why he was still alive when we had been told to kill each other. Why was it that only the locals had to commit suicide while Japanese soldiers were allowed to survive? We felt betrayed. After the war, I coined the phrase, 'Gunsei, Minshi,' which means 'the army survives, the people die'."

This mentality also manifested itself in Japan's dogged refusal to surrender – even after the first atom bomb was dropped over Hiroshima, immediately incinerating 66,000 civilians. After the war, although Hirohito remained emperor, he was forced to renounce his divinity, and his sovereignty. However, he continued to cast a shadow over the nation.

> "Men were handed grenades, clubs and scythes to kill their own families and themselves with"

In 1970, one of the country's most acclaimed writers, Yukio Mishima, barricaded himself inside the headquarters of Japan's Self-Defence Force. After a lengthy speech denouncing the country's post-war military decline and constitution, in full view of heckling troops, he committed seppuku with a dagger, with his followers cutting off his head, as his guts spilled out. It was a last desperate gasp of the samurai, roaring out in one final act of defiance. However, Japan had moved on; the country had seen enough death and war; this was the time for life and peace.

Image source: Getty Images, Alamy


A 19th-century woodblock of a samurai about to commit suicide, with his farewell poem placed in front of him

當世武勇傳
高埼佐一郎

Jisei: Death poetry

In preparation for their death in battle, or as part of ritual suicide, samurai composed a traditional poem bidding farewell to life

Written by Tim Williamson

Roughly translated as a 'farewell poem to life', a jisei is a poem traditionally composed in preparation for one's death. Drawn from a mixture of Zen Buddhism, Chinese Confucianism and Shinto traditions, jisei poems frequently contain natural imagery, as the writer reflects on their life, their place in the world, and their transition to the afterlife. Often in the tanka form – 31 syllables over five lines – jisei were written by scholars, poets, monks, but also samurai, whose poems frequently reflected on duty, clan loyalty and the core tenets of bushidō.

Centuries ago, samurai would compose their jisei and carry it with them into battle, but they were also written as part of ritual suicide, or seppuku. One famous jisei comes from Asano Naganori, lord of the famed 47 Rōnin, which inspired Japan's most famous folktale. Sentenced to death after attacking a government official at the shogun's palace, Naganori wrote poem 1 (in the box to the right) in farewell.

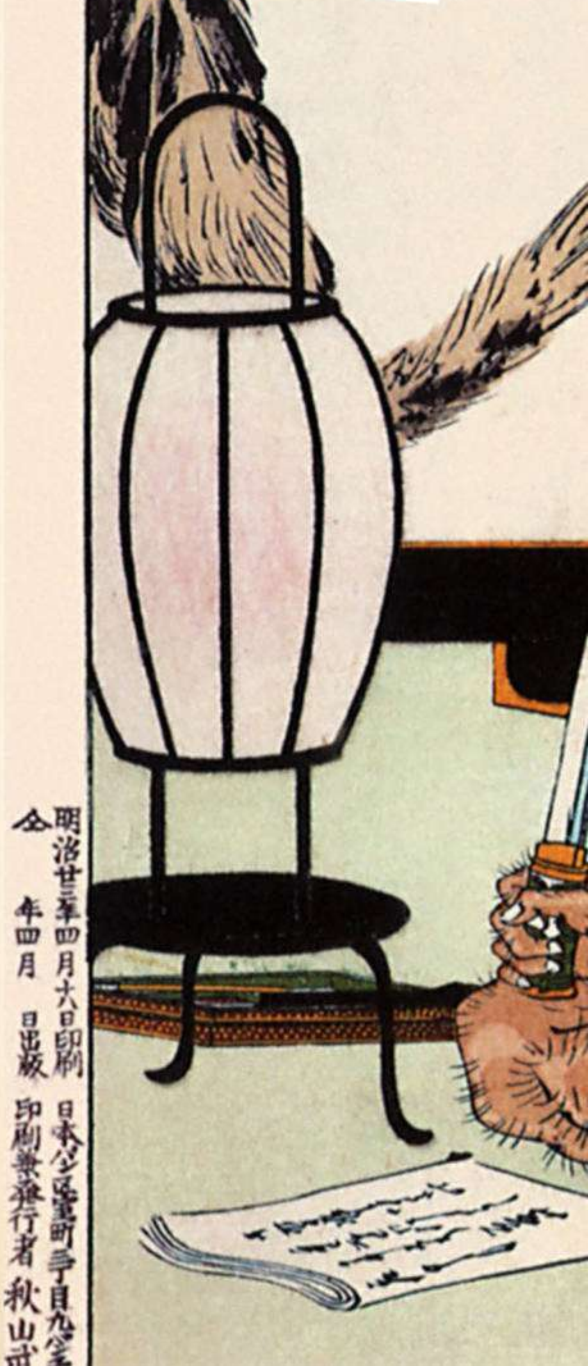
Flowers, particularly Japan's national flower, the cherry blossom or sakura, often appear in jisei poetry to symbolise the beauty but also the brevity of life. However, many other natural images, as well as seasonal motifs, were used to express the writer's meditations. After his defeat at the Battle of Uji in 1180, the poet and warrior Minamoto no Yorimasa prepared to commit seppuku. His jisei compares himself to a rotten or lifeless tree, reflecting upon his regret at having not produced an heir (2, right).

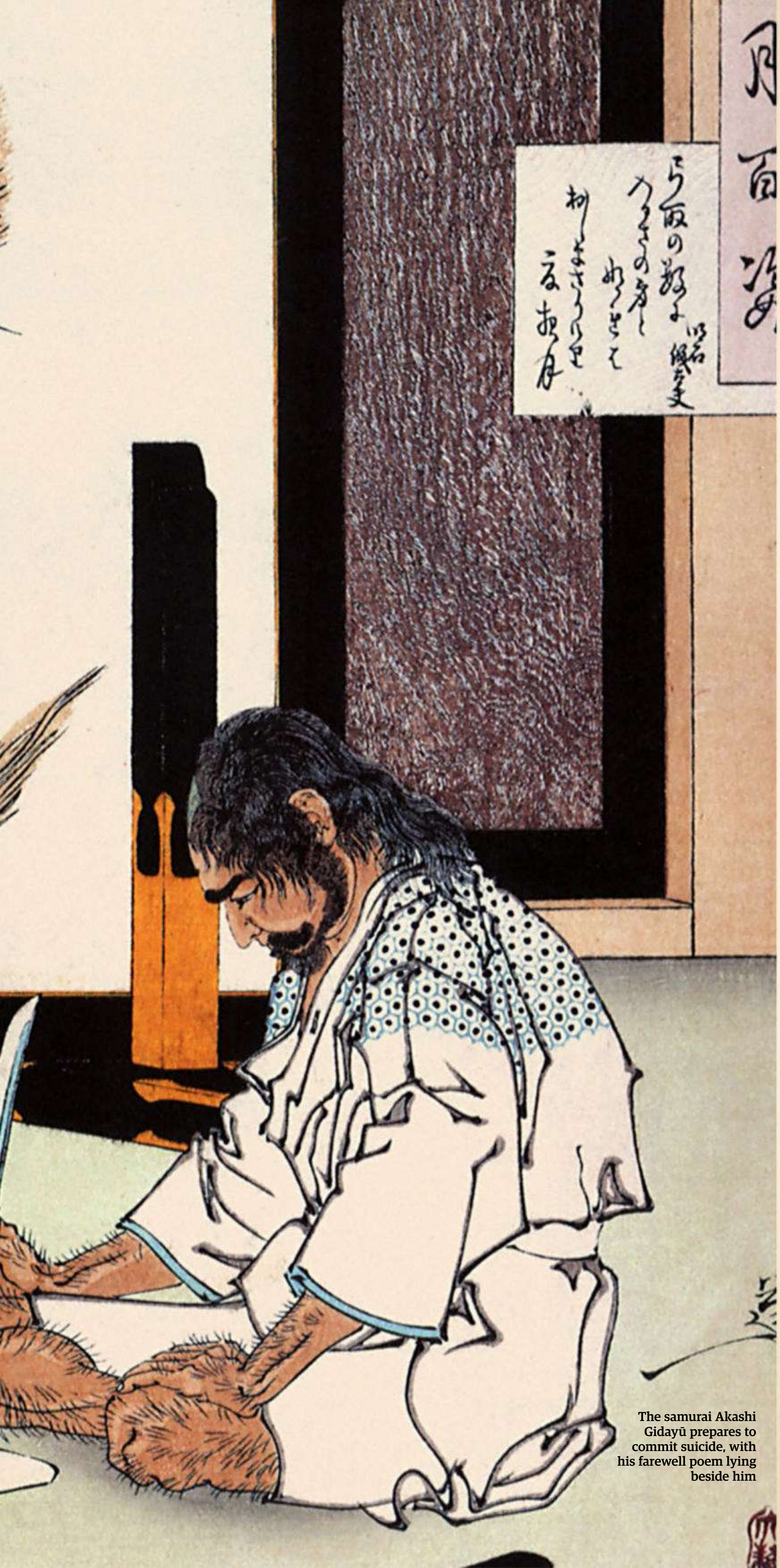
Before the Battle of Shijōnawate in 1348, the young samurai general Kusunoki Masatsura had a premonition of his own death and composed his jisei by carving it onto the door of a temple. In it he expresses his wish to take his place among fellow fallen warriors. He was then defeated in single combat during the battle, and committed seppuku as a result (3, right).

In 1912, General Nogi Maresuke and his wife Shizuko committed suicide on the day of the Meiji Emperor's funeral, following the old samurai tradition of not outliving one's master, known as junshi. In preparation for his death, Nogi wrote his own jisei (4, right)

While Nogi carefully composed his poem to express his enduring loyalty to the emperor, many jisei were not so deliberately planned, and often were spoken aloud, or sung spontaneously by the dying. The 15th-century warrior-poet Ōta Dōkan was assassinated in 1486, and with his final breaths he's said to have composed poem 5 (right).

Yamaoka Tesshu, a celebrated 19th-century samurai, swordsman and calligrapher, composed his jisei in the haiku form. While he was painfully dying of stomach cancer, his poem describes the immediate experience of agony, interceded by the calling of a bird outside – birds and ravens have always been closely associated with death in Japanese tradition (6, right).





The samurai Akashi Gidayū prepares to commit suicide, with his farewell poem lying beside him

Famous jisei

Discover the lyrical, allusive stanzas of death poetry. For the authors and the context of each poem, see the text to the left

[1]
More than the cherry blossoms
Inviting a wind to blow them away,
I am wondering what to do
With the remaining springtime.

[2]
Like a fossil tree
From which we gather no flowers,
Sad has been my life
Fated no fruit to produce.

[3]
I have a feeling
I will not be returning,
so among the names
of those who died by the bow
I inscribe my own.

[4]
The Master of the world
Has passed away –
And after him,
Eager to serve my lord
Go I.

[5]
Had I not known
That I was dead
Already,
I would have mourned
the loss of my life.

[6]
Tightening my abdomen
against the pain.
The caw of a morning crow.

© Getty

Philosophy of the samurai

The common view of warrior classes from history is one of bloody violence and rough manners – but the samurai turned their lives into works of art

Written by Ben Gazur

When many people think of the samurai they think of bushidō – the Way of the Warrior. This moral code that governed the actions of samurai was never actually a single philosophy as different clans followed different rules. By examining Japanese culture, however, we can see how the samurai grew from simple soldiers to become the warrior poets and philosophers we know them as today.

HIGASHIYAMA CULTURE

Much of what we consider as distinctively samurai is derived from Higashiyama Culture as developed in the Ashikaga shogunate in the 15th century. Under Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa there was a harmonisation of the cultures enjoyed at court and those of the warrior samurai. It was no longer sufficient to be a bold fighter. Samurai were now expected to cultivate the arts and act in accordance with philosophical principles.

Yoshimasa planned his own retirement in the Temple of the Silver Pavilion in the Higashiyama hills outside of Kyoto, from which this pinnacle of Japanese culture derives its name. The construction of this building and the life of contemplation and artistry Yoshimasa enjoyed there shaped Japanese aesthetics for generations.

Yoshimasa patronised Noh theatre, employed talented ink painters, celebrated ikebana flower arranging, and raised the Japanese tea ceremony to an art. The small room constructed at the Silver Pavilion for drinking tea is the oldest tea room in Japan and a model for all that came later. The Silver Pavilion can be seen as a response to the ornate and glittering Gold Pavilion built to celebrate the warrior culture of earlier generations. Yoshimasa was creating a new, simpler, ideal for the samurai.

The works of art Yoshimasa gathered around him formed the basis of the Higashiyama Treasure – priceless paintings and artefacts that are considered national treasures today. Several of his advisers in the collecting of art works were born samurai but devoted their lives to beauty. The artworks gathered in the Silver Pavilion were not mere decoration however. The Silver Pavilion embodies the philosophy and aesthetics that moulded later samurai thought.

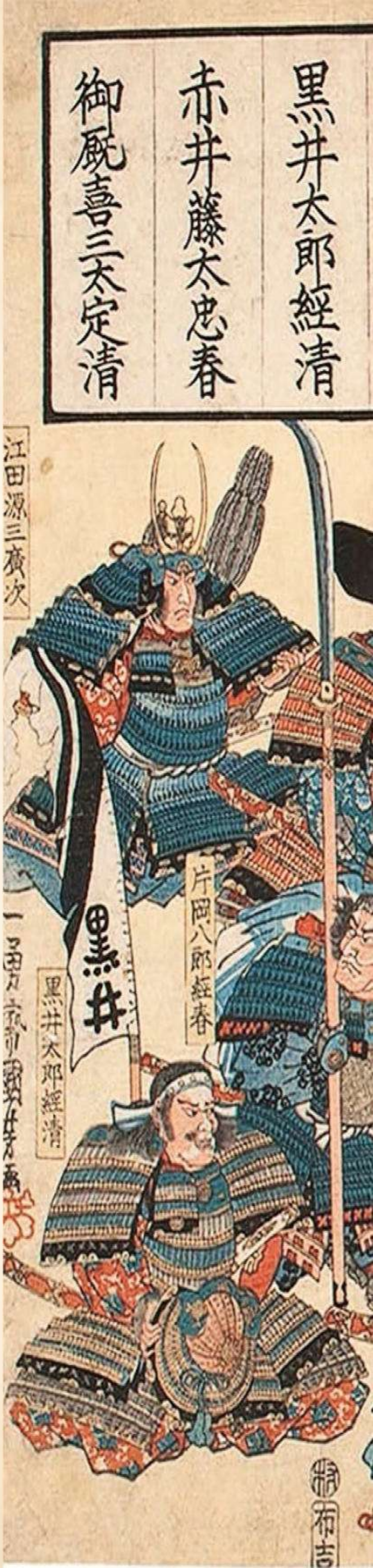
WABI-SABI

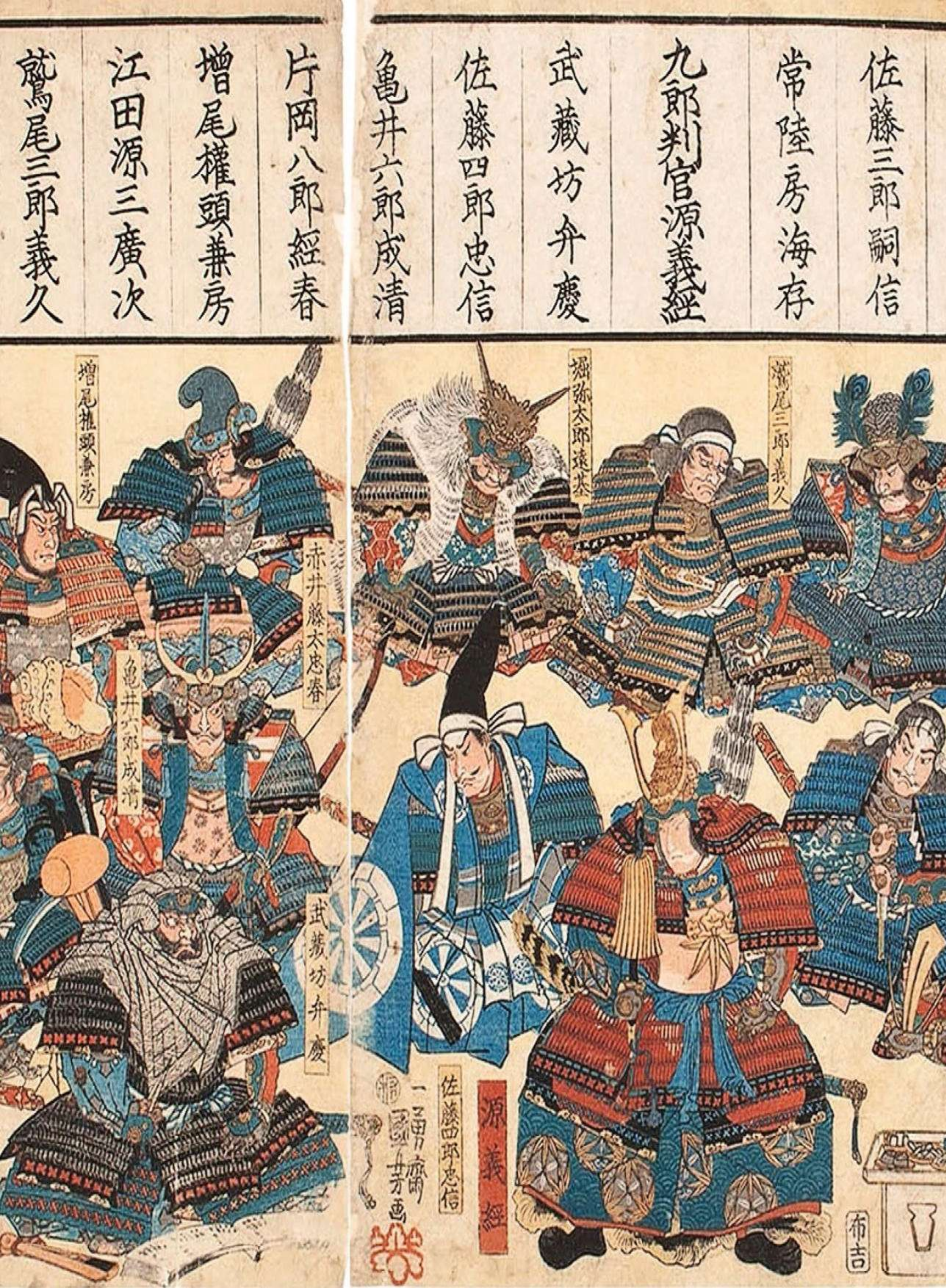
The Silver Pavilion as planned by Ashikaga Yoshimasa was intended to be covered in glittering silver. Yet as we see it today it has no gilding. The pavilion is unfinished, weathered and, to Japanese sensibilities, perfect in its imperfection. It is an example of the Japanese ideal of Wabi-sabi.

Wabi had originally referred to the miserable state of living in nature, far away from other people but it shifted in the 15th century towards a wistful melancholy. Sabi was a term meaning thin or withered. Together these two words might conjure up a bleak outlook but when placed together they turned into a notion that the wear and damage objects receive as they are used could be beautiful.

Wabi-sabi is a sense of aesthetics based on the acceptance of transience and imperfection in the world. A flawless object may attract our attention for a moment, but a ceramic bowl with a drip in its glaze gives us pause to consider how it was made and the art of the maker. Age and individuality in an object is respected. The tides of time should leave their mark on an object just as waves on the beach mark time on sand.

Wabi-sabi was an important principle for samurai because they lived hard lives. They were likely to bear scars from their battles and wield old and repaired weapons. An acceptance of the fleeting nature of perfection, and life itself, spurred warriors into battle. Wabi-sabi was described in the *Letter of the Heart* that set out the principles of the tea ceremony. It noted that "however cultivated one's manner, a painful self-awareness of one's


黒井太郎經清
赤井藤太忠春
御厩喜三太定清
江田源三廣次
片岡八郎經春
黒井
黒井太郎經清


伊勢三郎義盛
佐藤三郎嗣信
常陸房海存
九郎判官源義經
武藏坊弁慶
佐藤四郎忠信
亀井六郎成清
片岡八郎經春
増尾權頭兼房
江田源三廣次
鷲尾三郎義久
鷲尾三郎義久
堀弥太郎遠基
増尾権頭兼房
赤井藤太忠春
亀井六郎成清
武蔵坊弁慶
佐藤四郎忠信
源義經
一勇斎國芳画
布吉

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The tranquillity of tea

Japanese samurai had a special relationship with tea

The Japanese tea ceremony, known as cha-no-yu, is inextricably linked to Buddhism. The first reference to the ceremony comes from the 9th century when a monk called Eichū brought tea to Japan from China. After preparing tea for Emperor Saga, it was ordered that tea plantations should be set up. Other Buddhist monks refined both the cultivation and serving of tea.

Tea remained a luxury available only to the court and samurai classes, and the ceremony surrounding it became complex. In the *Letter of the Heart*, written in 1488, Murata Juko codified the philosophy and actions performed at the tea ceremony. The tea was to be central to the event, and gaudy or gilded vessels were abandoned for simple pottery. The 16th-century Zen tea master Sen no Rikyū used the tea ceremony to popularise the aesthetic philosophy of wabi-sabi.

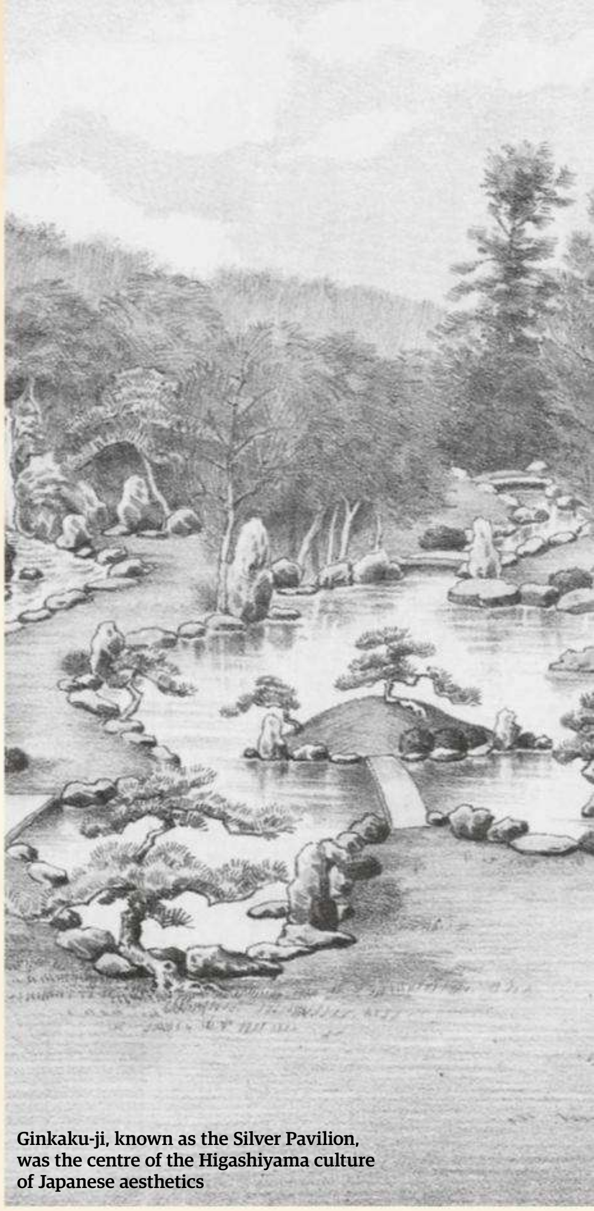
Samurai who entered the tea house would leave their arms and weapons outside so that their differences and conflicts could be shed too. They accepted each other as individuals and not as warriors during the ceremony. Yet the tea ceremony was not an idle relaxation for samurai – it trained them in focus and allowed them to gain insights into others that might be of benefit on the battlefield.

shortcomings is crucial. Remember that self-assertion and attachment are obstructions". Even a cup of tea could remind a samurai of how to face a battle without fear.

Wabi-sabi also taught samurai that some things are out of their control. It is perhaps best expressed in the story of Sen no Rikyū when he asked a servant to prepare his tea house. The servant scrubbed it top to bottom and scoured the garden in preparation. When Sen no Rikyū arrived, he shook a maple tree to randomly scatter some leaves. Wabi-sabi was thus achieved in joining human efforts with the transience of nature. In battle you cannot expect the fight to be as neat as your plans.

The same cup of tea that might give a samurai pause to consider the nature of life could also give them hope. Their sense of aesthetics meant that repairs to a damaged vessel should be seen and not hidden. It can even become art as in kintsugi, where pottery is repaired with gold so that the cracks show. Even a battle scar could be beautiful.

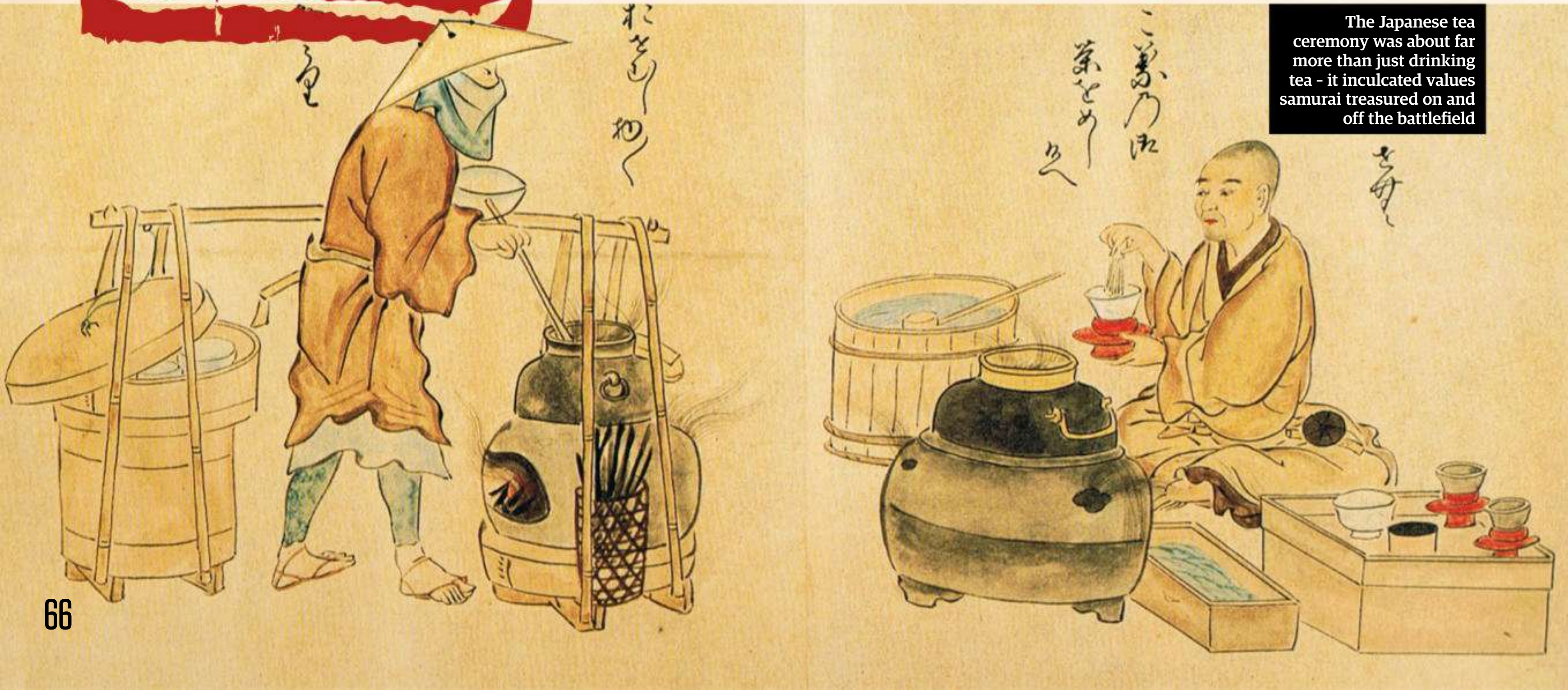
Wabi-sabi developed during the Warring States period. When there was so much conflict it was a comfort to find peace in the passing of all things and a joy to treasure venerable objects that may have been damaged.

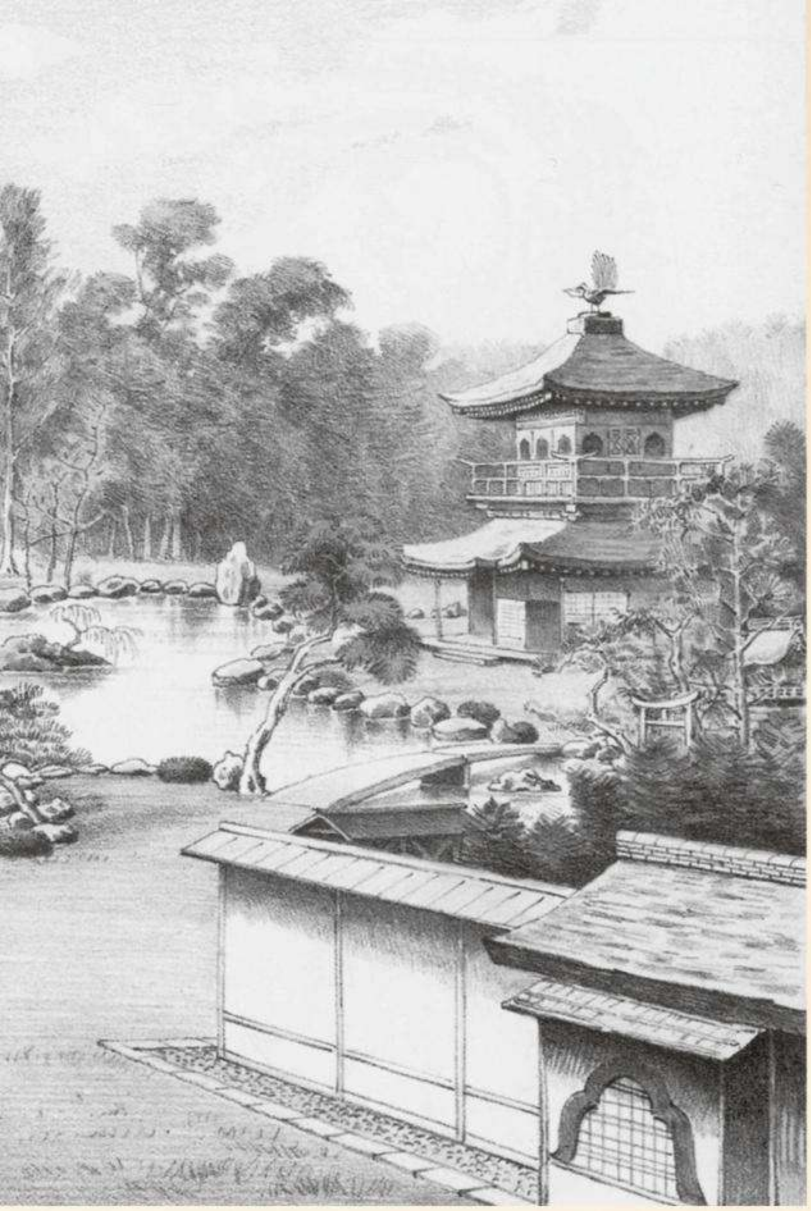

Ginkaku-ji, known as the Silver Pavilion, was the centre of the Higashiyama culture of Japanese aesthetics

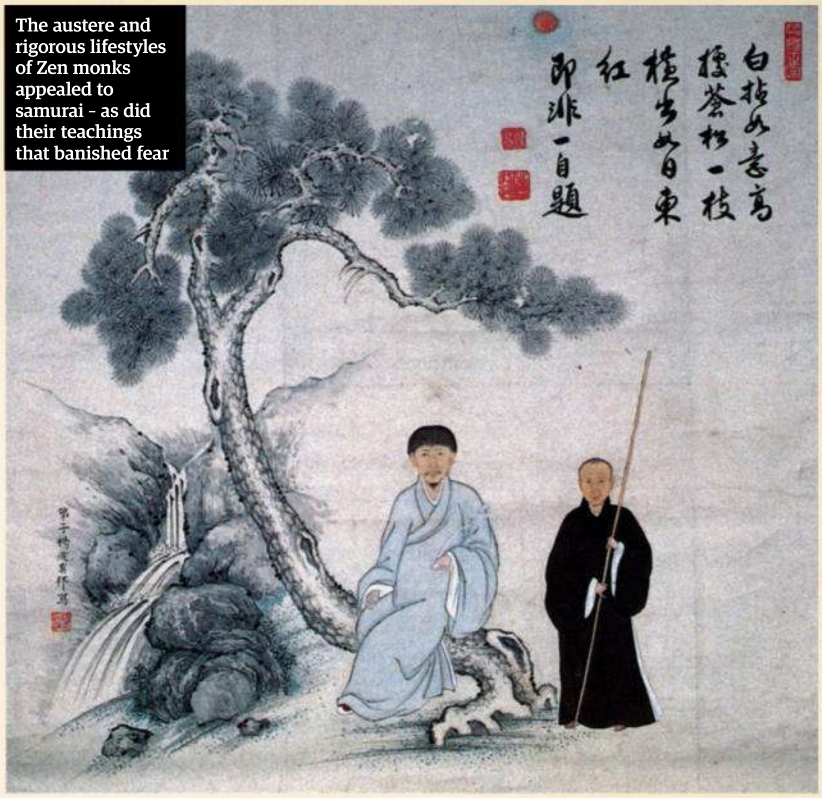
MONO NO AWARE

Mono no aware is another term that has no easy translation into English. It can broadly be defined as the wistful realisation that all things are impermanent and it developed from the Buddhist idea of non-attachment.

When your feelings for the passing of a thing match the appearance of decay, you are feeling mono no aware. It's why looking at blossom is so important in Japan; the flowers realise a brilliance for just a few days, but soon wither and pass away. You can curse the flowers as they die or you can enjoy their brief beauty. And maybe they are more beautiful because they do not last. For the samurai who faced death every time they drew a sword, non-attachment helped them to cope with their fears. There is a saying in Japan that "among blossoms the cherry blossom [is best], among men, the warrior". Both may glitter for a time, but the warrior can be cut down just as easily as a blossom blows away.


The Japanese tea ceremony was about far more than just drinking tea - it inculcated values samurai treasured on and off the battlefield





The austere and rigorous lifestyles of Zen monks appealed to samurai – as did their teachings that banished fear

> "Even a cup of tea could remind a samurai of how to face a battle without fear"

SHINTO AND ZEN IN SAMURAI THOUGHT

The adoption of Zen Buddhism led to great changes in 12th-century Japan. This must have left some aristocrats with a deep sense of mono no aware when they saw their way of life passing. The samurai were beginning to grow in importance in society.

Shimazu Yoshihiro, the leader of the Shimazu samurai who lived in the 16th century, wrote a poem reflecting the Zen belief in the transience of life that the Samurai were adopting:

"In the spring – flowers
And in the fall – foliage,
Everything is fleeting.
This is the human race –
Gatekeepers of the void."

> "It was Shinto that rounded out the ethical philosophy of the samurai"

Many samurai were followers of Zen and other forms of Buddhism. The 17th-century sword master Takuan Sōhō wrote a treatise called *The Unfettered Mind* that was influential in how later samurai would view the world through a Buddhist lens. Addressed specifically to the samurai class, it marries the pacific world of the Buddha with the art of war. Battle, properly entered with a clear mind, now becomes a form of meditation.

"Although you see the sword that moves to strike you, if your mind is not detained by it and you meet the rhythm of the advancing sword… the sword that was going to cut you down will become your own, and, contrarily, will be the sword that cuts down your opponent."

The samurai often used the term 'mushin' – 'no mind'. It comes from a Zen phrase meaning 'the mind without mind'. It is a state where instinct and training take over and the mind is free from worry, doubt and ego. It was employed by martial artists and was useful on the battlefield where there is no time for thought. A fighting Samurai sought to exist within the moment.

The rigorous mental and physical training that Zen monks underwent was thought to be helpful to young warriors. If you were able to bear hardship and starvation without complaint, then you were a useful Japanese soldier. If you could face an enemy without fear or perturbation, then you could be trusted to stand your ground when it mattered most in a fight.

The influence of Buddhism was opposed by some. During the Momoyama period (1573-1603), the warlord Oda Nobunaga attacked monasteries and put Buddhist monks to the sword. The relative decline in Buddhism saw a return to the ancestral worship of Shintoism.

Shintoism is the indigenous faith of Japan that sees the landscape and world as being full of spirits called kami. It was Shinto that rounded out the ethical philosophy of the samurai. While Buddhism taught warriors self-control and to confront problems with calm resignation, it was Shinto that taught them their strict loyalty to their masters. The duties of the samurai, their reverence for ancestors and filial piety were all derived from Shinto.

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 saw Shintoism become one of the foundations of the new Japan. By providing a sacred core to Japanese nationalism, it supported the administration and hierarchy of the state.

Of course the Meiji Restoration also witnessed the dissolution of the samurai as a class. From then on, only some of the virtues and philosophies of the samurai would be cultivated among the populace – provided they benefited the nation.

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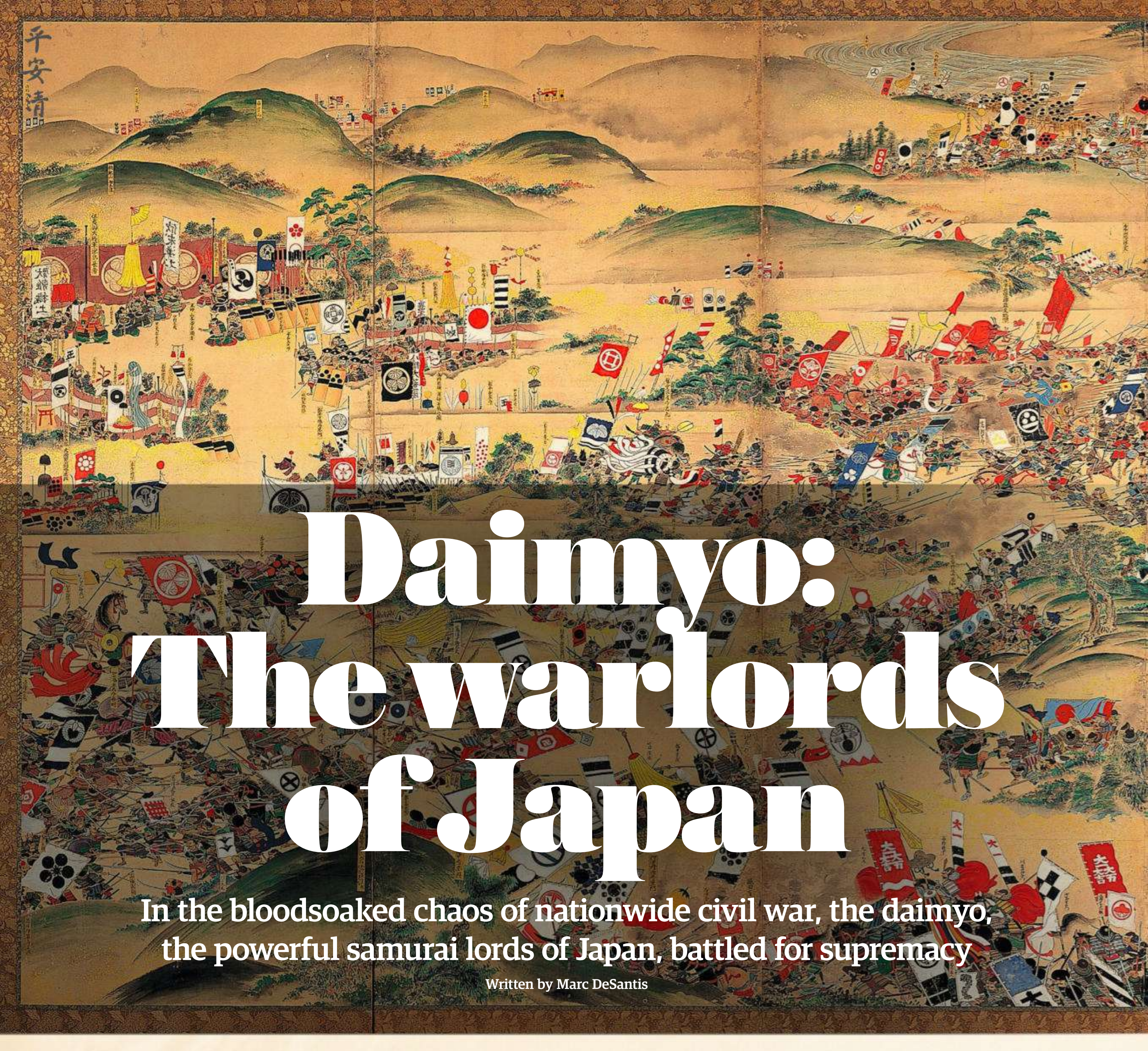


Daimyo: The warlords of Japan

In the bloodsoaked chaos of nationwide civil war, the daimyo, the powerful samurai lords of Japan, battled for supremacy

Written by Marc DeSantis

Japan has a long history of feudal warfare. Such conflict reached its apogee during the Sengoku Jidai, 'the Age of the Country at War', that stretched from 1467 until 1615. The warlords of this fractured Japan, riven by civil wars, were known as daimyo, the 'Great Names', that ruled over large territories of the country.

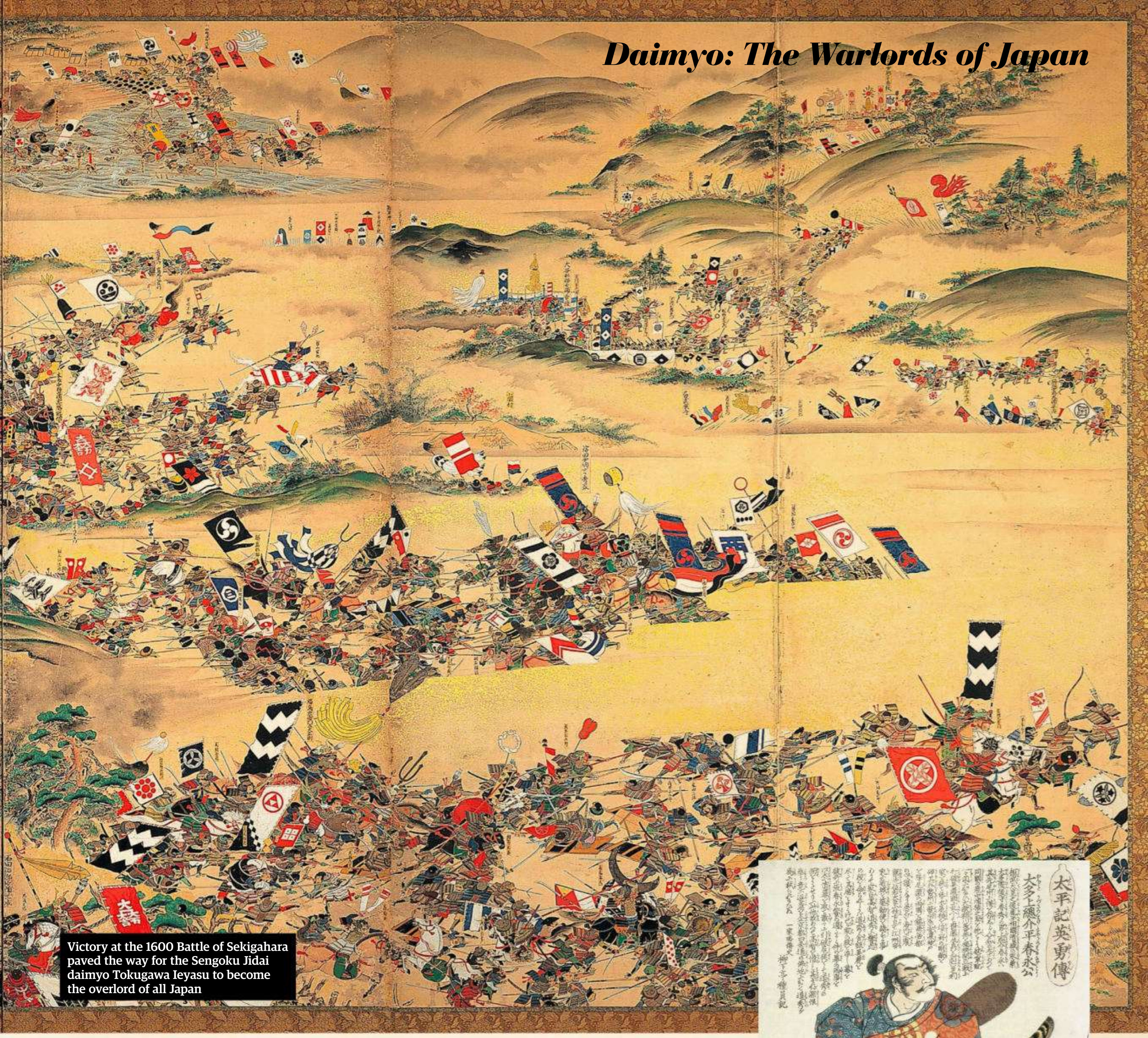
The daimyo proper, as opposed to the traditional aristocrats of medieval Japan, traced their origin to the heyday of the Ashikaga shoguns. The 14th century witnessed the rise of a new samurai aristocracy known as the shugo. Originally, shugo were military governors serving the prior Kamakura bakufu (military government) and they were subsequently integral members of the following Ashikaga Shogunate. Like the daimyo of later years, the shugo were the lords of their own domains.

The power of the Ashikaga Shogunate declined precipitously in the late 15th century. The country had been shaken by a series of devastating peasant revolts. Then the ten-year Ōnin War (1467-77) between two rival clans, the Hosokawa and the Yamana, was fought over the control of Kyoto, Japan's capital, and the seat of the emperor himself. Much of Kyoto was destroyed in the conflict, and the authority of the Ashikaga was largely ruined along with it.

> "The 14th century witnessed the rise of a new samurai aristocracy known as the shugo"

HOJO SOUN: THE FIRST DAIMYO

The disruption of traditional lines of authority that followed the Ōnin War opened up opportunities for ruthless samurai to grab a share of power using any means they possibly could. Old families of ancient lineage could be knocked from their perches by aggressive underlings, or perhaps they could even be annihilated altogether.


Victory at the 1600 Battle of Sekigahara paved the way for the Sengoku Jidai daimyo Tokugawa Ieyasu to become the overlord of all Japan

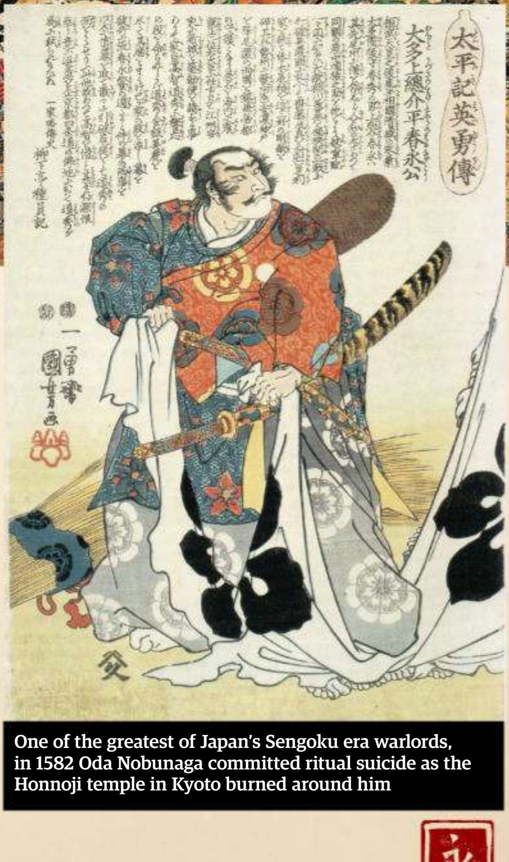
This era of instability and civil war that engulfed Japan, the Sengoku Jidai, allowed for the true daimyo to come to the fore. The subversion of lordly aristocrats by persons substantially lower on the social scale was termed gekokujō, 'the low overcoming the high.'

Thus, the prototypical daimyo, Hōjō Sōun (1432-1519), had himself initially been only an ordinary samurai. He put down a rebel leader in Ise province in 1491 and for his good work was put in charge of the region. He and his sons relentlessly enlarged their holdings in ensuing years. In addition to being an excellent soldier, Sōun, who would live until the ripe old age of 88, showed a flair for good governance. The law code he promulgated would provide a legal template for other daimyo.

THE RIVALS: TAKEDA SHINGEN AND UESUGI KENSHIN

The Sengoku Jidai would see the rise of several legendary daimyo. Among the foremost of these warlords were the great rivals Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin.

Takeda Shingen (1521-73) was the master of Kai province in modern-day Yamanashi prefecture, while Uesugi Kenshin (1530-78) ruled Echigo province in north-central Japan. Both were, in addition to being daimyo, Buddhist monks. Each had shown ruthlessness in achieving power in their respective domains. Shingen had mounted a coup against his own father, a daimyo who had planned to pass over him and give his lands to another, younger son.



One of the greatest of Japan's Sengoku era warlords, in 1582 Oda Nobunaga committed ritual suicide as the Honnoji temple in Kyoto burned around him

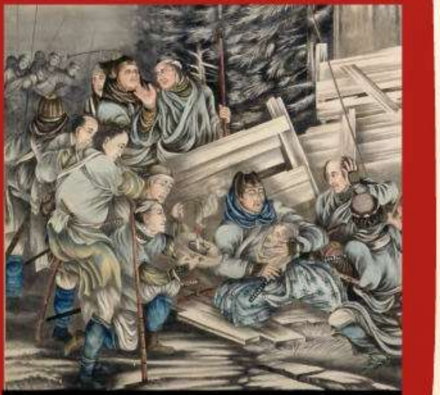
The 47 Rōnin

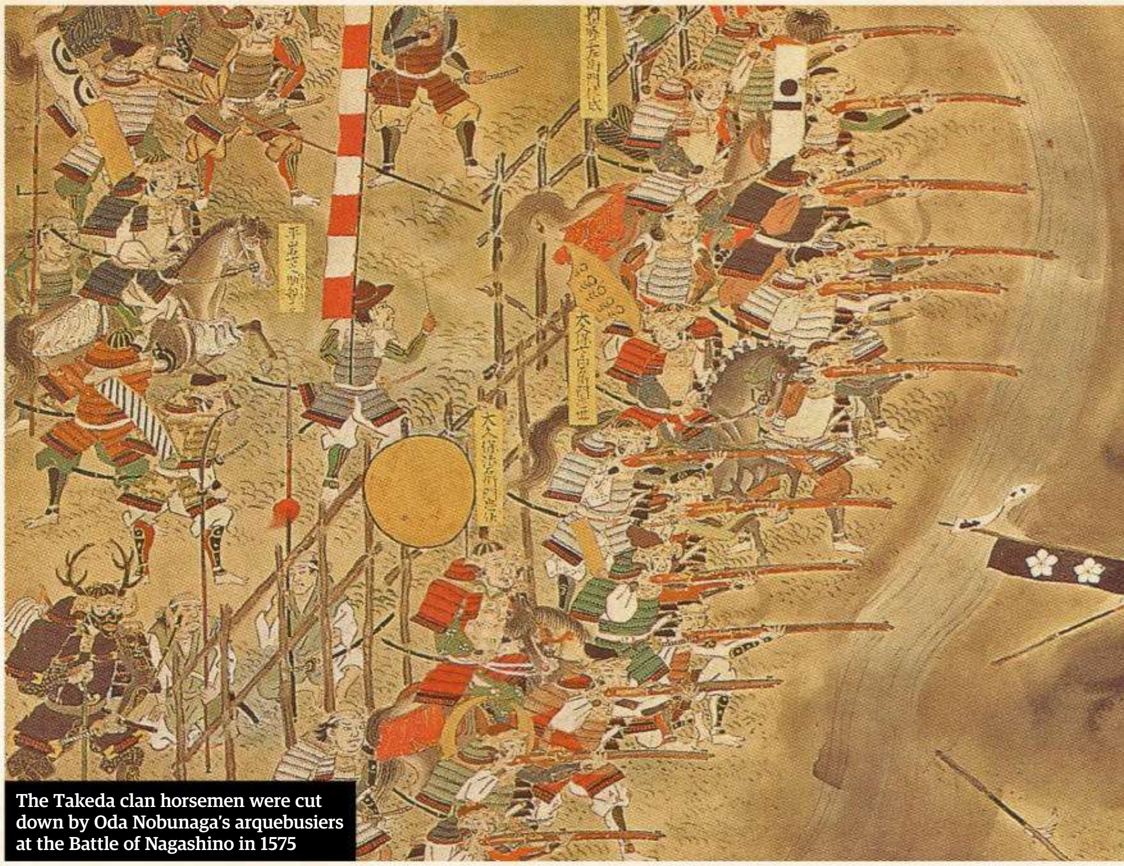
In 1701, a lesser daimyo of Harima province, Asano Naganori, was goaded into wounding Lord Kira Yoshinaka, an obnoxious government official of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Merely unsheathing his blade in the shogun's palace in Edo was a grave crime carrying a penalty of death. Even though he had been provoked by Kira's insults, Asano's offence could not be excused. He was made to take his own life by committing seppuku, ritual suicide, and his territory was seized.

The death of Asano left his former samurai without a master. They had become rōnin, and 47 of them would not allow his death to pass unavenged. They devised a plan to strike back at Kira. To prevent him from learning of their intent, they went their separate ways, pretended to have dispensed with being samurai, and had no contact with one another.

Then one snowy December evening in 1702, the 47 Rōnin mounted a surprise attack on Kira's townhouse inside Edo. Kira's own samurai fought the rōnin hard in defence of their lord, but at last, Kira was captured. The leader of the 47, Oishi Yoshio, beheaded him with the very dagger that Asano had used to commit seppuku. Kira's head was carried to Asano's tomb in the city and placed on it.

The plan had succeeded, but the 46 surviving rōnin could not be allowed to get away with murder, no matter how much their actions may have accorded with the ideal of samurai loyalty. Each man was himself made to commit suicide, and join their lord in death.


The 47 Rōnin went to extraordinary lengths to obtain vengeance for their dead master, the ill-fated Lord Asano


The Takeda clan horsemen were cut down by Oda Nobunaga's arquebusiers at the Battle of Nagashino in 1575

An excellent general, Shingen was also known as a wise and generous civil administrator. The peasant farmers of Kai were relatively well treated in comparison to those ruled by other daimyo, and they gave Shingen their loyalty.

Kenshin's ascent was even more dramatic. Originally named Nagao Kagetora, he was a vassal of the more powerful Uesugi clan. However, the Uesugi fell on hard times during the Sengoku Jidai, and this opened the door for Kenshin to step through. After a series of defeats had left the Uesugi clan prostrate, its chief, Uesugi Norimasa, appealed to his vassal for succour.

This was granted, but Kagetora did so on the condition that he be adopted as the Uesugi heir and also be made the lord of Echigo. He changed his name to Uesugi Kenshin.

Shinano province lay between the domains of Uesugi Kenshin and Takeda Shingen, and it became their battleground. They would meet in five separate battles at Kawanakajima, a strategically important piece of land, between 1553 and 1564. These were fought with large doses of chivalry. The greatest and most dramatic of the encounters, the fourth battle, was fought in 1561. When news reached Uesugi that Takeda's salt supply had been disrupted by another daimyo, he delivered some of his own to his enemy, saying that he battled with a sword, not salt.

ODA NOBUNAGA

After the unraveling of the Ashikaga Shogunate following the Ōnin War, Japan would be bereft of a central government for over a century. The civil wars would come to an end only with the appearance of three remarkable daimyo. The first of these was Oda Nobunaga.

The son of an unimportant daimyo in Owari province, Oda won a surprising victory over a much stronger opponent in 1560 at the Battle of Okehazama. In 1568, he was in control of Kyoto, and the shogun, Ashikaga Yoshiaki, was his own creature. In 1573, Yoshiaki made the mistake of going against Oda, who drove him into exile. A good portion of Kyoto was burned in the process. The Ashikaga Shogunate, for so long toothless, was now truly finished.

Oda was an enthusiastic adopter of firearms, the first of which had been brought to Japan by Portuguese traders. His arquebusiers, deployed in lines and firing in disciplined volleys, decimated the charging cavalry of the Takeda clan (the formidable Takeda Shingen was now dead) at the Battle of Nagashino in 1575.

Oda's control over Japan increased over the next few years, and he would eventually corral 22 provinces into submission. However, in 1582 he would be betrayed by one of his own vassals while in Kyoto's Honnō-ji temple. The building itself was aflame, and like a true samurai, Oda committed seppuku (ritual suicide) so that he might die by his own hand.

TOYOTOMI HIDEYOSHI

One of Oda's subordinates, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, seized the chance brought into being by Oda's

slaying to take vengeance on the perpetrators. An extremely capable general of low birth, Hideyoshi vaulted to the pinnacle of power, and he set about bringing Japan's daimyo under his own domination.

With an army of a quarter-million soldiers, he extended his power over the southern Japanese islands of Kyushu and Shikoku in 1587. By 1590, he had secured the submission of the last remaining independent daimyo in Honshu, Japan's main island. The country had at last been unified. All daimyo swore loyalty oaths to Hideyoshi, getting in return acknowledgments of their rights to their own fiefs.

TOKUGAWA IEYASU

Hideyoshi's 1592 invasion of Korea would last several years and prove to be a bloody, costly failure. His death in 1598 created a path to paramount power for the greatest of the Sengoku daimyo to arise. Tokugawa Ieyasu, a leading vassal of Hideyoshi, had his base at Edo (the future Tokyo). He first defeated a powerful alliance of his enemies at the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. The last embers of rebellion were finally stamped out with Tokugawa's capture of Osaka Castle in 1615.

These military successes made Tokugawa the unchallenged master of all Japan. Having taken the moribund title of shogun in 1603, he made Edo the seat of the national government. For him, and his descendants who would become shoguns after him, the goal was a stable, peaceful Japan. The land would still be ruled by daimyo, with each man the lord of his domain, but all would acknowledge the Tokugawa shogun as his supreme overlord.

RŌNIN: MEN OF THE WAVES

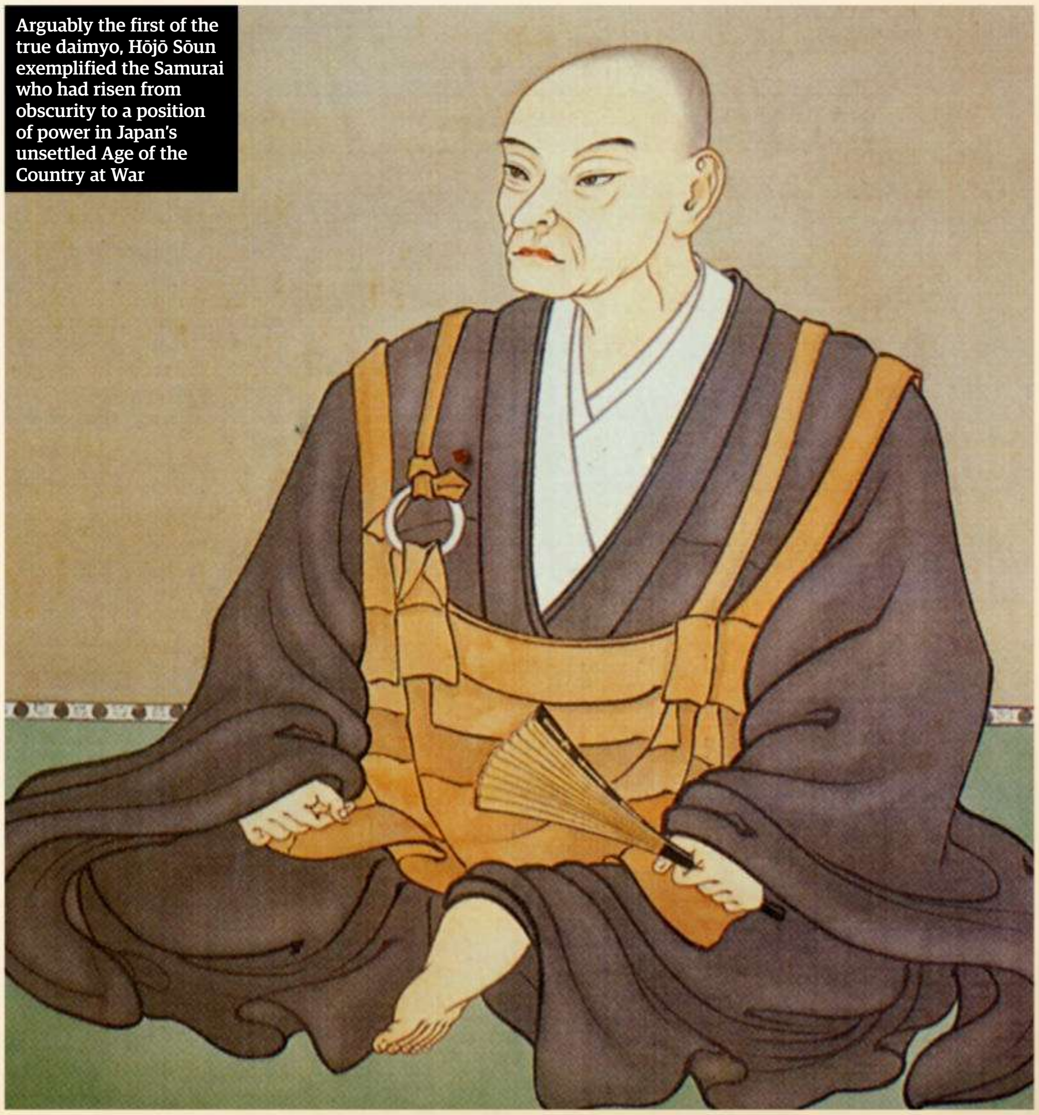
The samurai, so strongly linked to his daimyo, might well find himself without a lord, depending upon the fortunes of war or other vicissitudes of life. These samurai without masters were known as rōnin, 'men of the waves'. Though they may have lacked masters, they still possessed their superlative military skills, and they were a ready source of recruits for a daimyo who wished to quickly bulk up his army.

One daimyo, for example, named Kuroda Yoshitaka, shrewdly advised his officials to overlook it if the coins paid to the ronin were too heavy or if the rōnin pilfered some of them. He needed to bring rōnin to his banner, and having a reputation for generosity was the surest way to do this.

At the end of the Sengoku Jidai, many rōnin made their way to Osaka Castle to defend it against Tokugawa Ieyasu. Such service brought them money, always welcome, and also gave them the chance to take vengeance on the enemy. In the end, Osaka Castle was doomed, and the rōnin inside along with it. After it fell in 1615, many were beheaded by the victorious Tokugawa.

Rōnin might come into existence even after the end of the Age of the Country at War. In the late 19th century, when the forces of the resurgent emperor moved to supplant the Tokugawa shogunate as the central government, they sought the support of the peasantry. To this end, rōnin were used to disseminate the news that taxes would be slashed in half if the imperial side gained power, and the message did not fail to gain adherents for the imperial party.

The memory of the rōnin persists among modern Japanese. The story of the 47 Rōnin who took vengeance for their master is justly famous, and even their title is still used. High-school graduates who fail to secure admission to the universities of their choice, and choose to wait a year to take the entrance examinations again, are called rōnin.



Arguably the first of the true daimyo, Hōjō Sōun exemplified the Samurai who had risen from obscurity to a position of power in Japan's unsettled Age of the Country at War

Who were Japan's lady samurai?

We delve into Japanese history to reveal the so-called onna bugeisha - fearsome, skilled female warriors who took to the battlefield

Written by Dr Nyri A Bakkalian

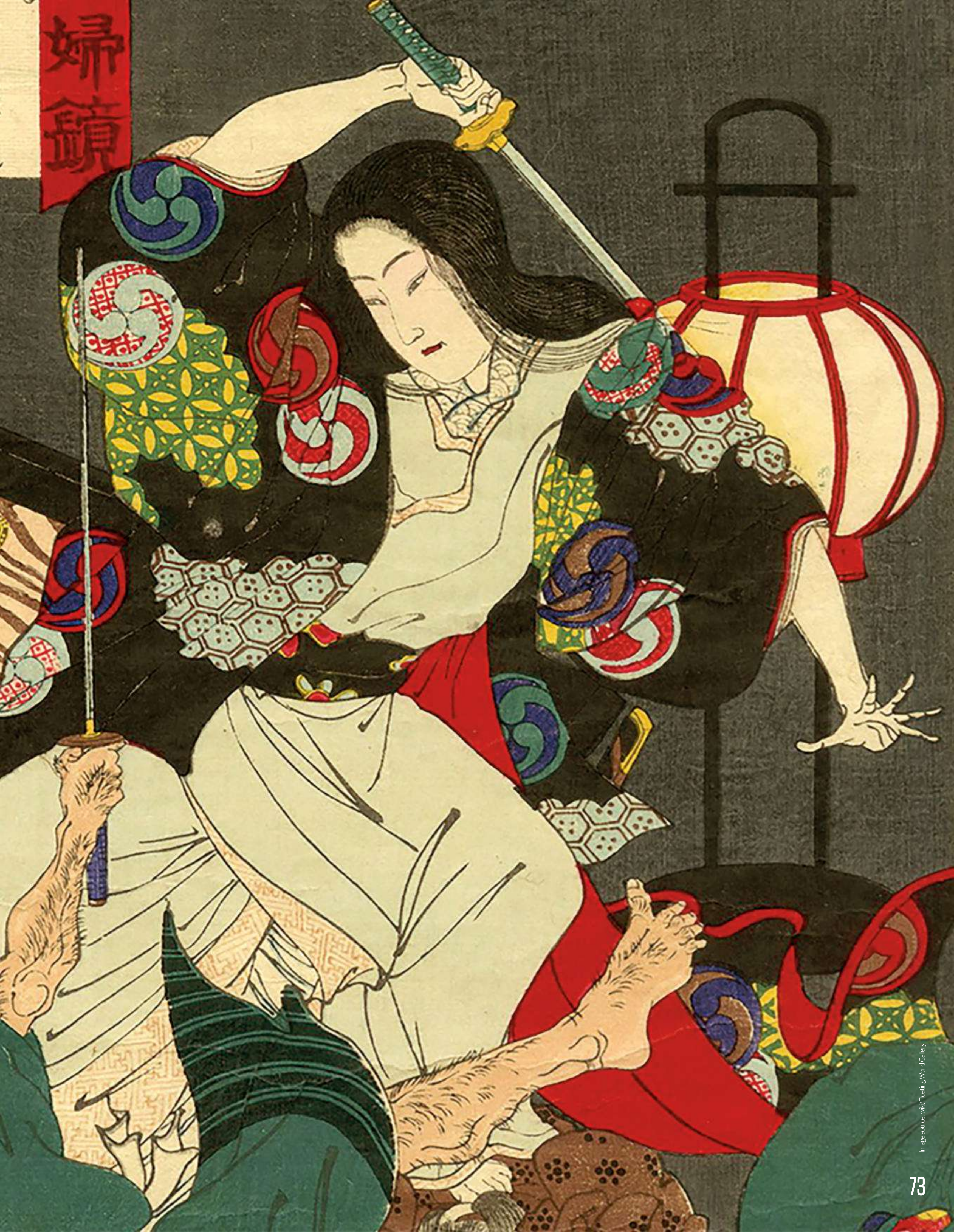


Image source: wiki/Floating World Gallery

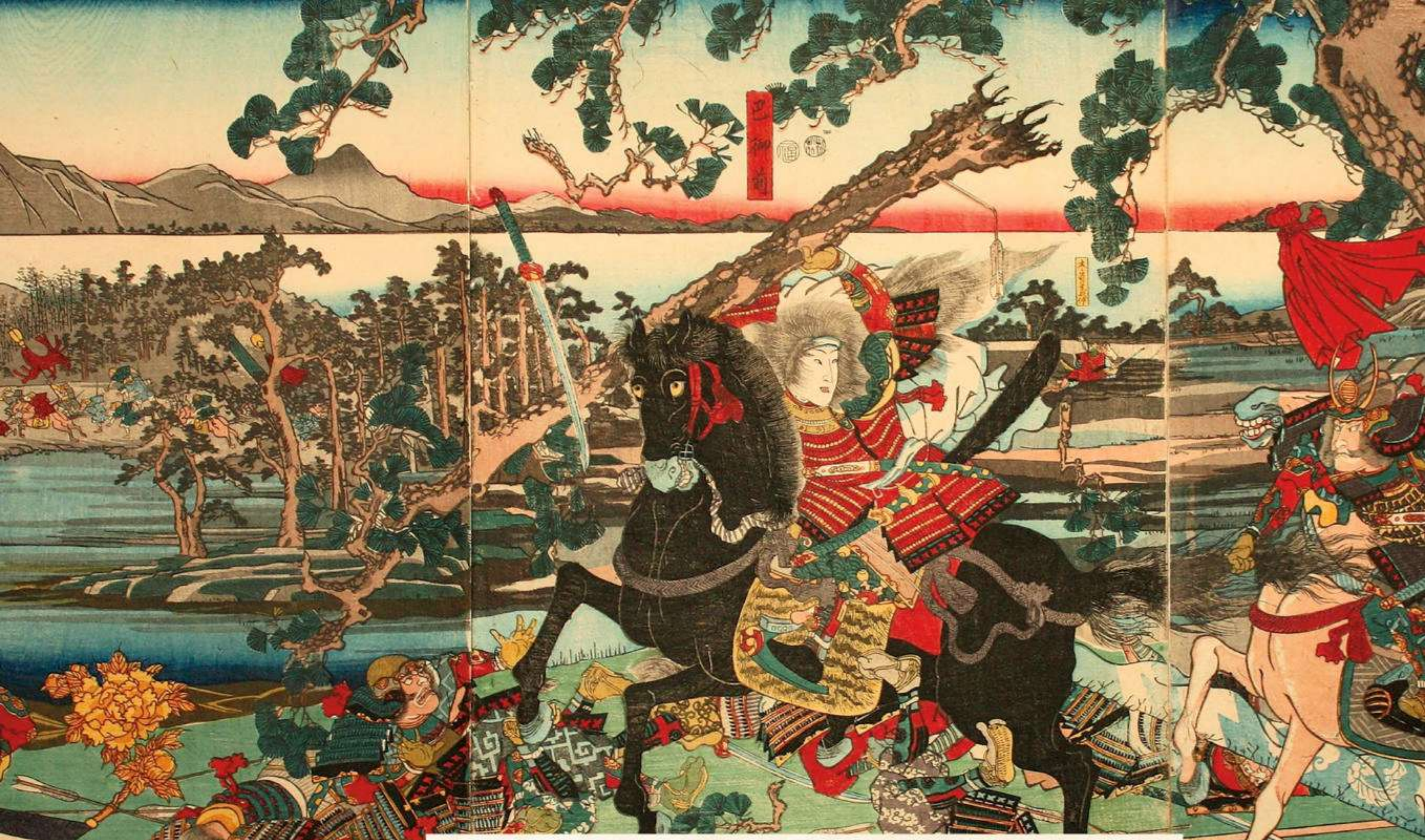


Image source: wiki/morimiya.net

Japanese schoolgirls show off their prowess with the naginata, 1935

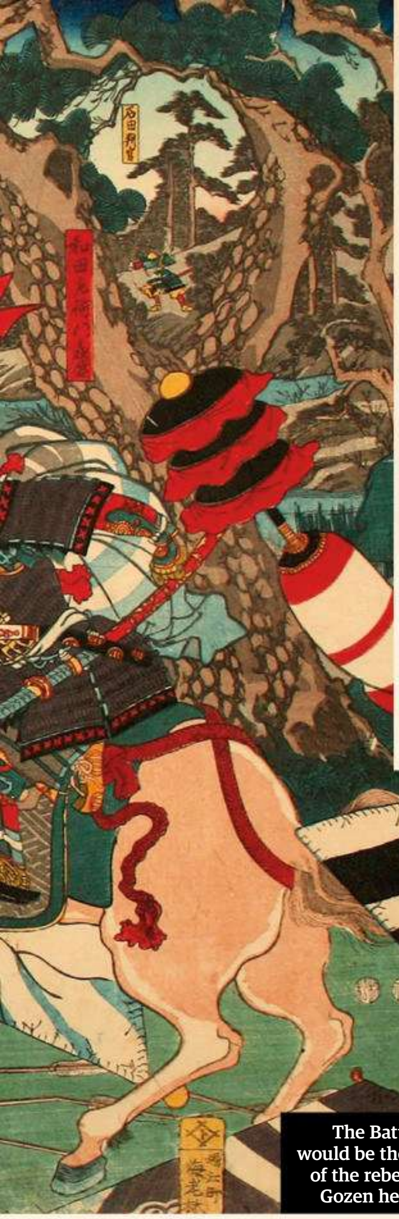
© Getty Images

War and combat is not the province of men alone. Throughout history, regardless of gender, women have survived war and been combatants. And while many of the household names in Japanese military history are male, women have always been part of Japanese warfare, despite their frequent erasure from popular history. The common term one often encounters today for women combatants in Japanese history is onna bugeisha, which we'll translate here as 'women martial artists'.

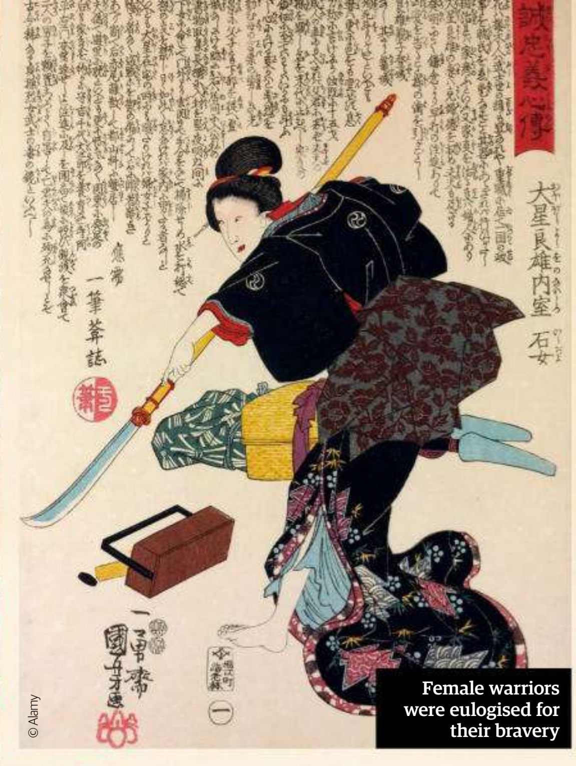
Who were these women, and how do their stories fit into the broader story of pre-modern Japanese military history? If we're to seek out these stories, we need to be mindful of where and how to search. And we need to seek out women's stories on their own terms, rather than as an extension of the men. In the opening words of the first issue of early feminist magazine *Seito* (*Bluestocking*) in 1911, author and activist Hiratsuka Raicho (1886-1971) famously wrote, "In the beginning, woman was the sun." She was evoking the image of the sun goddess Amaterasu as she explained the magazine's aims of helping reclaim the inner 'light' of women's independence in an era that was seeking to force women into the role of "good wife, wise mother". Seeking the story of women at war in pre-modern Japanese history is, to this writer, one way of seeking out that light.

The first thing to bear in mind with the term onna bugeisha is that it's a modern day catch-all term used more in non-Japanese writing than in Japanese writing. Martial arts, as they exist today as systematised schools of practice in which one can become licensed, have not always existed. If you search for 'onna bugeisha' online you'll certainly find modern writing on some women, especially those in the Edo period who were notable practitioners of their martial arts. Chiba Sanako (1838-96), part of the famed Chiba family of instructors in Hokushin Itto-ryu, is a good example of this. But to apply 'bugeisha' to people in Heian or Sengoku era warfare is a bit of a stretch.

The term, as it tends to be used particularly in English, is looking not only at skill in systematised martial arts but more broadly at the histories of women at war. So where are these women 'hiding'? We must try to think more broadly, to find more of their stories. Rather than bugeisha (martial artist), where there may or may not have been practical application, we think it's worth approaching the subject



The Battle of Awazu would be the final stand of the rebellion Tomoe Gozen helped to fight



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Female warriors were eulogised for their bravery

of women combatants more broadly, whatever form that may take.

Some women combatants in Japanese history are particularly well known, even in English-language writing – they're likely to be the first ones you encounter if you do a little searching even in English. Tomoe Gozen (c.1157-c.1247) is at or near the top of that list. She was a combatant in the Genpei Wars of the late-12th century, under the command of Kiso no Yoshinaka, one of the Genji generals. And she appears in the classic text *Heike Monogatari*, which offers us one of our best descriptions of her appearance and her skill at arms.

Off the battlefield, but no less important in the shaping of military and civil policy, was Hojo Masako (1156-1225), remembered as the Nun-Shogun (Ama Shogun) for the significant political power she wielded in the early Kamakura shogunate. Through her marriage to Minamoto no Yoritomo, the first Kamakura shogun, she also ensured her birth family's continued political influence in the shogunate for the rest of its existence. Several decades after her death, it was a Hojo regent Hojo Tokimune (1251-84) under whose leadership the Kamakura Shogunate rallied Japanese forces in their defence against the Mongol Empire's two attempted invasions of Kyushu.

But of course, Tomoe Gozen and Hojo Masako are far from the only women in Japanese military history. This writer's research into women at war in Japanese history only made headway because of a focus on, and drawing from sources in, local history. Bear in mind, the perspective of Japanese-language scholarship by Japanese scholars is going to be different from the work of a non-Japanese scholar using Japanese and English sources and writing in English. With that caveat, here is just a bit of what we have learned.

Some women combatants we learned about were at the top of the samurai caste – women who came from the families of daimyo and their highest retainers. Occasionally, especially when there were no other heirs to inherit a lineage, there were some among them who were, in effect, daimyo themselves, a position typically the preserve of men. Two examples worth considering are Date Onami (1541-1602) who became castellan of Sukagawa after the death of her husband Nikaido Moriyoshi (1544-81), while Tachibana Ginchiyo (1569-1602) inherited the leadership of the house

> "Tomoe Gozen and Hojo Masako are far from the only women in Japanese military history"

Famous warriors

Some of the better-known Japanese women of war

Empress Jingu

A legendary figure said to have bloodlessly conquered Korea while pregnant with her son Ōjin. The story tells of her son remaining in the womb for three years so she could wage war.

Tomoe Gozen

Japan's most famous female warrior, she was renowned for her strength and skill, most particularly as a mounted archer in the Genpei Wars.

Nakano Takeko

Taking up arms with her mother Koko and sister Masaki, she was part of an all-female unit, or Joshigun, that fought in defence of Aizu (now Fukushima) against the Meiji regime.

Hangaku Gozen

Mounting the tower of Echigo Castle in 1201, she rained down arrows on attackers. Legend claims she slew men and horses, blocking their attack until an archer wounded her.

Hojo Masako

Wife to the first shogun of Japan Minamoto Yoritomo, she retained a massive amount of power and influence upon his death in 1199. She would go on to lead the further conquest of Japan with her second husband.

Niijima Yae

Another warrior who defended Aizu during the Meiji Restoration, she was a master marksman in the Boshin War aged 22. She later served as a nurse in both the First Sino-Japanese War and Russo-Japanese War.

Image sources: wiki/LACMA, wiki/British Museum, wiki/Torstein Barnhardt, wiki/Library of Congress, wiki/Kikuchi Yosai, wiki/DWCLA of Tachibana in Kyushu after her father Tachibana Dosetsu (1513-85) died without a male heir. Not all of those women went into battle themselves, but there were plenty of (male) daimyo who did not personally take to the field either. Being a regional governor of this sort did not require your engagement in battle.

Others were skilled politicians and teachers of men who have become household names. Katakura Kita (1538-1610), whose male relatives were senior vassals to the house of Date, was a well-read, well-trained, well-connected person, arguably better educated and prepared for leadership than many of the men she knew. She helped guide the clan's policy and outside relations at Toyotomi Hideyoshi's court in Kyoto, and ensured that the clan stayed on Hideyoshi's good side amid the politicking and wars of the 1590s. Kita was also a wet nurse and first teacher in both literature and fighting arts to Date Masamune (1567-1636), the famed one-eyed xenophile warlord who founded the modern city of Sendai (now Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture). Kita thus had a critical role in building not only the clan's future but also, by extension, the future of northern Honshu. There are many more women like her in the histories of any major clan of that era, with or without skill in handling deadly weapons.

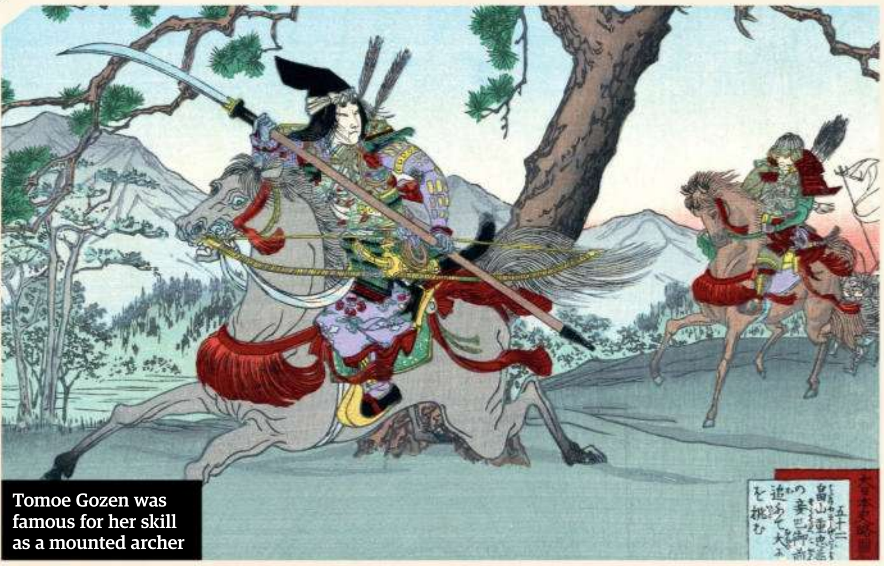
Other women in premodern Japanese military history were not quite so high in the samurai caste, but nonetheless established reputations for themselves as skilled practitioners of the martial arts as well as combatants. In some parts of Japan in the Edo period, basic proficiency in the martial arts was expected from women born to the warrior caste. This is not something separate from the world that the samurai caste built and inhabited, but rather was part and parcel of it.

Even in domains like the northern Aizu domain (modern Fukushima Prefecture), where women's participation in politics was prohibited by law, women still pursued training in the martial arts. This was at the very least perfunctory, and for some, in greater depth. In times of emergency, they were some of the first on the street in the castle town to ensure the protection of their community.

The Aizu women were another excellent example as they also famously put their training to practical application in the Boshin War of 1868-69. Nakano Takeko (1847-68), who like Chiba Sanako was a skilled and certified martial artist in peacetime, is Aizu's most famous woman combatant. Her affiliation to the Aizu domain was by proxy, as she was from a family of Aizu vassals permanently assigned to the domain's estates in Edo (now Tokyo). She joined the fighting outside the castle walls during the siege in 1868, dying in combat there. Yamamoto Yae (1845-1932) came from a family of gunnery instructors and was a skilled sharpshooter and artillerist renowned for her physical strength even at a young age. She too took part in the fighting at the Aizu siege and was noted for her use of the Spencer cavalry carbine, a surplus weapon imported from the recently ended American Civil War. After the war, she went to Kyoto and devoted herself to the cause of women's education. Later, Yae married Niijima Jo, an American-educated pastor, and together with him was a co-founder of Doshisha University, which still stands in Kyoto today.

Finally, there are those women about whom our historical picture is the most incomplete. One of them was a female

An actress poses in the armour of the Taira clan in the late 19th century

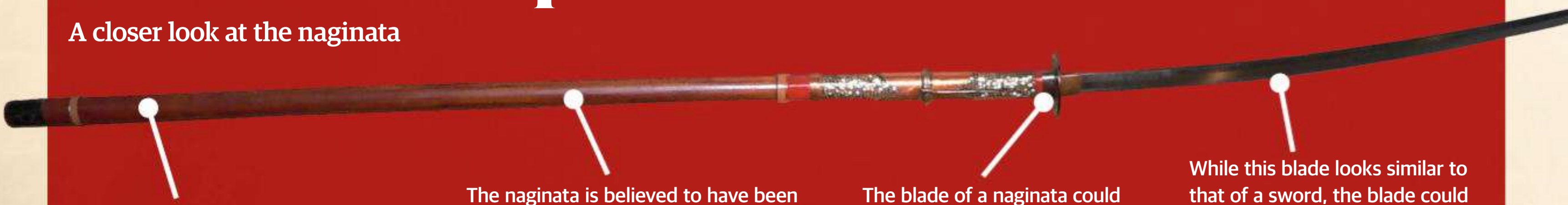


Tomoe Gozen was famous for her skill as a mounted archer

2x © Alamy

A Warrior's Weapon

A closer look at the naginata



Tendo-ryu bujutsu remains a popular form of martial art in Japan, primarily with women, with a number of public displays given in the form.

The naginata is believed to have been the preferred melee weapon for female warriors as it allowed them to use their centrifugal force to equalise any fight against stronger opponents.

The blade of a naginata could be up to one metre long and could also be mounted on a shorter handle to be used like a more traditional sword.

While this blade looks similar to that of a sword, the blade could also be much wider and curved, ideal as a cutting weapon to be swung around and used for middle-distance combat.

Image source: wiki/ Rama

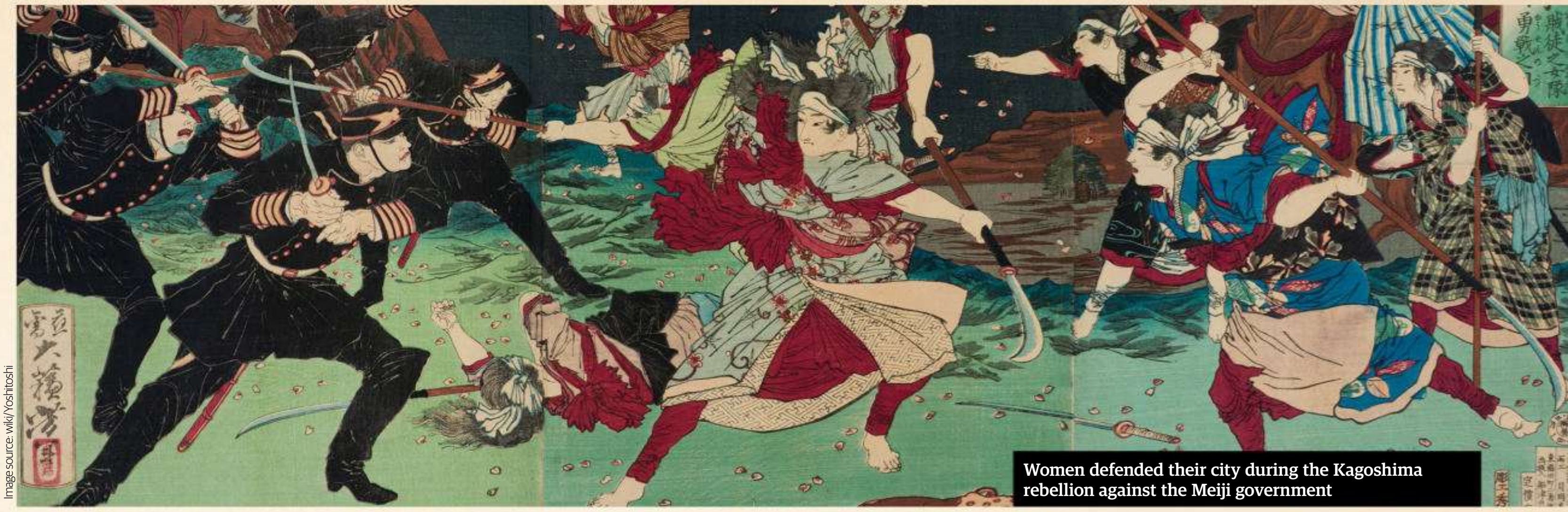


Image source: wiki/Yoshitoshi

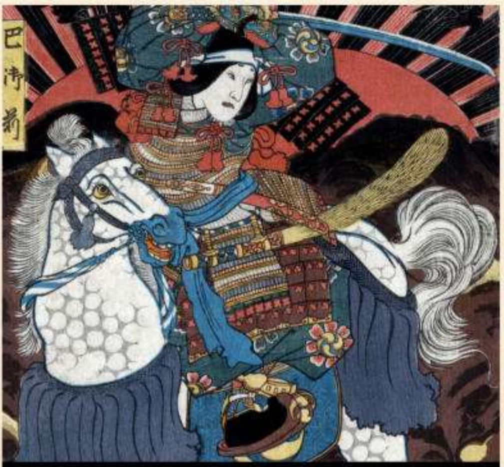
Women defended their city during the Kagoshima rebellion against the Meiji government

warrior in Kokura domain. We don't know her name for sure, nor do we know whether she was of samurai birth and what, if any, training she'd accrued in the martial arts. What we do know is that when Choshu troops took the northern Kyushu castle town of Kokura during the Second Choshu War in 1865, she was the only person the Choshu men found in the evacuated and torched town. This woman, who waited in the estate of a senior Kokura clan retainer, was armed with a sword. A Choshu rifle squad raked the building with gunfire before entering, and she killed at least one before being mortally wounded. One story has it that she looked the men in the eye before ending her life with her sword, denouncing them for their cowardice.

> "She was the only person the Choshu men found in an evacuated and torched castle town"

Another woman who took part in the battles of 1860s Japan was Koike Shisetsu (1824-78). Again, our picture is incomplete, but in this case it was because she lived a wandering life. She was born in Kaga (modern-day Ishikawa Prefecture) and was actually an artist by training, specialising in a Chinese-influenced style of ink painting called nanga. Perhaps even more interestingly is our discovery that, in modern terms, she might be considered a member of the LGBTQ community. But when the civil war of 1868 broke out, Shisetsu went north, taking part in the defence of Aizu alongside women like Nakano Takeko. Captured by the imperial army, she was released when it was discovered that she was not otherwise affiliated with the Aizu domain. Shisetsu went to Toyohashi, part of modern Aichi prefecture, and lived there for the rest of her life, continuing her work as an artist. Why did she go to Aizu, a place with which she had no prior affiliation? What prior experience did she have in handling a weapon, if any? These are worthy questions, and since she's never had more than a brief biography in various biographical dictionaries, Shisetsu is one historical figure whose story remains fascinating, and for which we will need to continue to search for further clues.

In short, the historicity of the term onna bugeisha notwithstanding, women combatants have always been part of military history, be it in Japan or anywhere in the world. Their place in the world of the samurai caste, in peacetime as well as at war, was integral. Their stories are there for the finding, if only we do due diligence in searching for them, especially in rich local histories and abundant local records. And in our search for those stories, it behooves us to ask why these tales seem to have been buried and why there are biases in both the source material as well as in modern interpretations of that source material. This, too, will help guide our further study and return these brave warriors to the place in history that they so clearly deserve.



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Tomoe Gozen depicted taking on military commander Wada Yoshimori

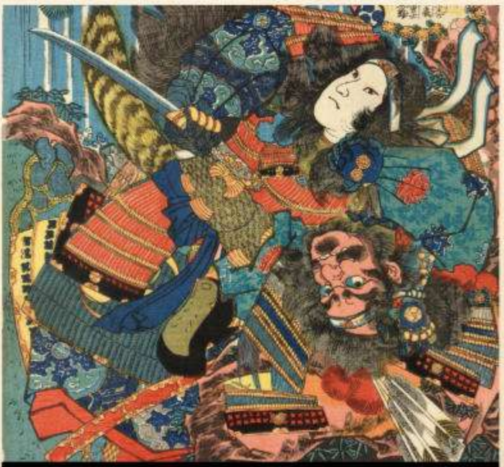


Image source: wiki/British Museum

Tomoe Gozen defeats a Taira warrior during the Yoshinaka campaign

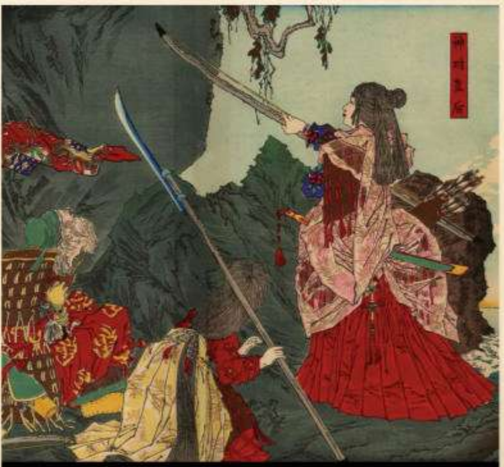


Image source: wiki/Waseda University Theatre Museum

The legend of Empress Jingu tells the story of a warrior queen

Source: Wiki / Utagawa Toyonobu

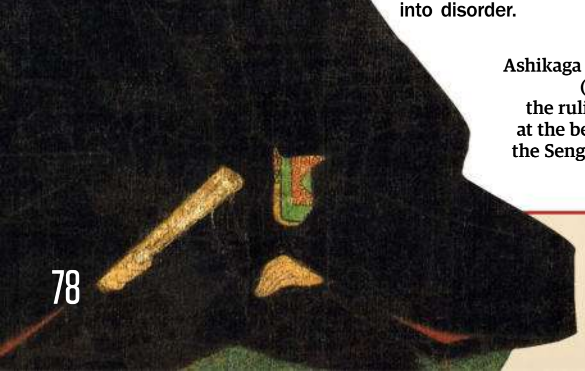
Timeline of… Japan's Sengoku Period

Early Modern Japan is consumed by internal warfare as rival clans fight each other in a prolonged power struggle that gradually unifies the country

15th century

EMPERORS, SHOGUN AND DAIMYO

During the late medieval period, the emperor is officially the ruler of Japan but his role is largely ceremonial. Real power lies in the hands of the shogun, a noble warlord who forms a feudal military government. In the 15th century the shogunate gradually loses control over the subordinate daimyo lords who proceed to plunge the country into disorder.



Source: Wiki / Tosa Mitsunobu

Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1436-90) is the ruling shogun at the beginning of the Sengoku period

1467-77

ONIN WAR

A dispute between the Hosokawa and Yamana clans escalates into a nationwide civil war involving the Ashikaga shogunate and several daimyos across Japan. The war turns the Ashikaga shoguns into puppets of the Hosokawa until the 1550s and also initiates the Sengoku period.

© Alamy

The magnificent pagoda of Daigo-ji Buddhist temple in Kyoto was built in 951 and is one of the few buildings to have survived the destruction of the Onin War

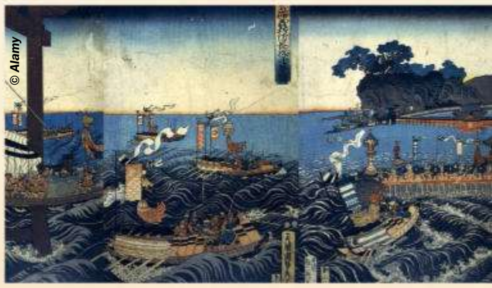
16 October 1555

BATTLE OF MIYAJIMA

01

The powerful Ouchi clan is defeated by the numerically inferior forces of daimyo Mori Motonari on the sacred island of Miyajima in Aki Province. The Mori clan are subsequently able to establish a foremost position in western Japan.

The forces of Motonari arrive by ship to Miyajima



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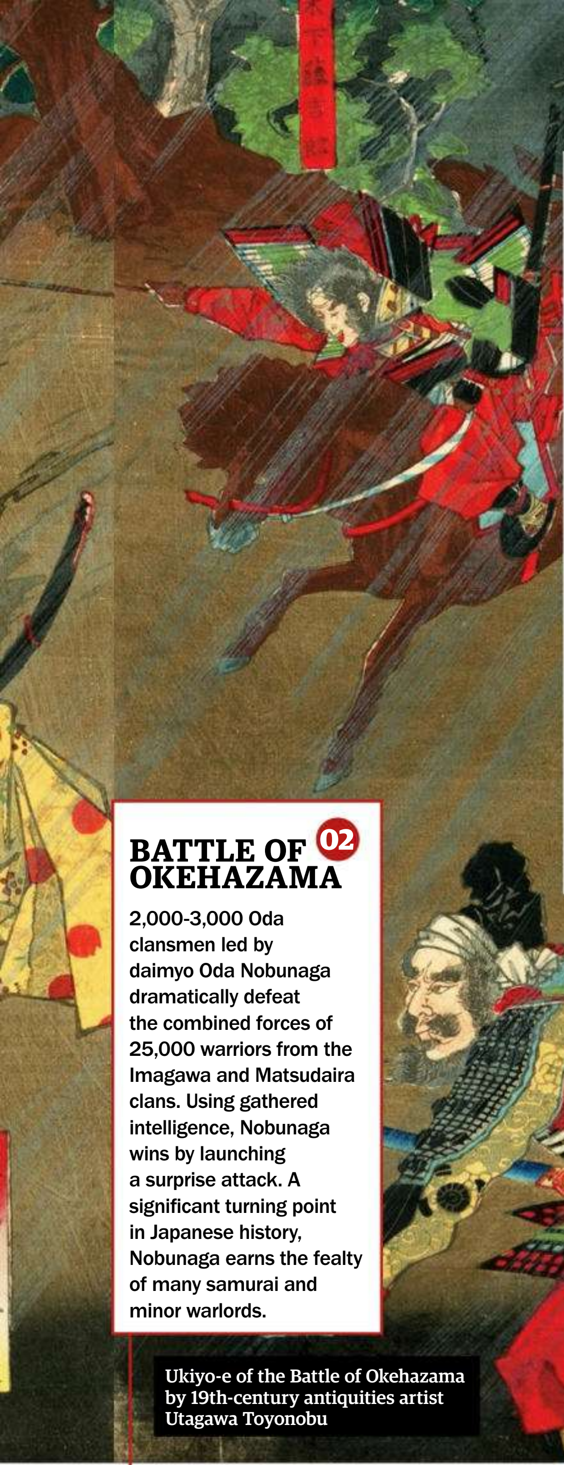


Ukiyo-e of the Battle of Okehazama by 19th-century antiquities artist Utagawa Toyonobu

May-June 1560

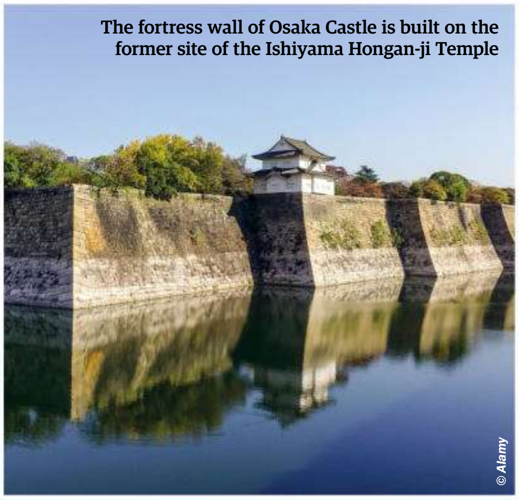
BATTLE OF OKEHAZAMA 02

2,000-3,000 Oda clansmen led by daimyo Oda Nobunaga dramatically defeat the combined forces of 25,000 warriors from the Imagawa and Matsudaira clans. Using gathered intelligence, Nobunaga wins by launching a surprise attack. A significant turning point in Japanese history, Nobunaga earns the fealty of many samurai and minor warlords.

August 1570-August 1580

ISHIYAMA HONGAN-JI WAR

Oda Nobunaga's forces fight a ten-year war against a powerful faction of religious zealots called the Ikko-ikki. The Ikko-ikki's's central base is the cathedral fortress of Ishiyama Hongan-ji. Nobunaga and his allies attack Ikki communities and fortifications in nearby provinces to weaken their support structure. Much of the fighting occurs at three sieges of Nagashima while Ishiyama Hongan-ji surrenders to Nobunaga.



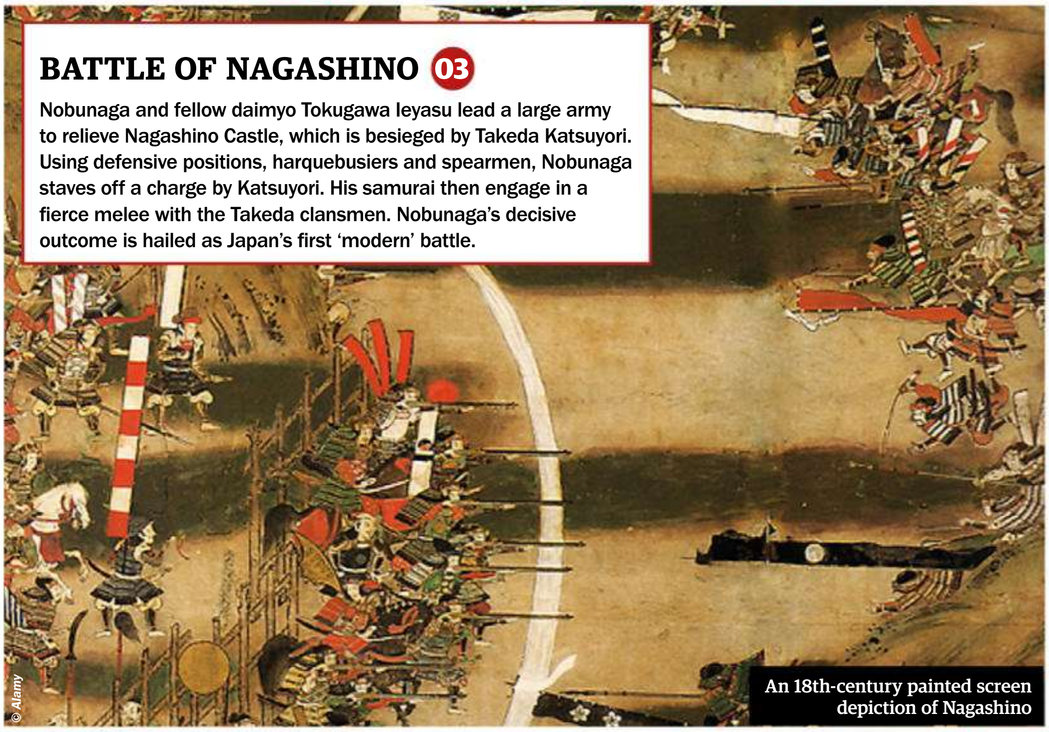
The fortress wall of Osaka Castle is built on the former site of the Ishiyama Hongan-ji Temple

© Alamy

28 June 1575

BATTLE OF NAGASHINO 03

Nobunaga and fellow daimyo Tokugawa Ieyasu lead a large army to relieve Nagashino Castle, which is besieged by Takeda Katsuyori. Using defensive positions, harquebusiers and spearmen, Nobunaga staves off a charge by Katsuyori. His samurai then engage in a fierce melee with the Takeda clansmen. Nobunaga's decisive outcome is hailed as Japan's first 'modern' battle.



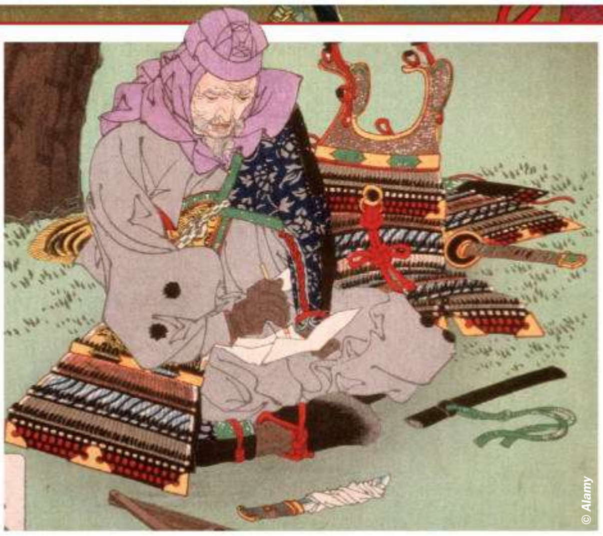
An 18th-century painted screen depiction of Nagashino

© Alamy

1577

SIEGE OF SHIGISAN 04

Forces of Nobunaga take Shigisan Castle from the Matsunaga clan to consolidate power in the Kansai area. The Matsunaga commander, Danjo Hisahide, commits ritual suicide with his son upon his defeat. Before he dies, Hisahide (a master of the tea ceremony) smashes his favourite tea bowl so that it does not fall into the hands of his enemies.



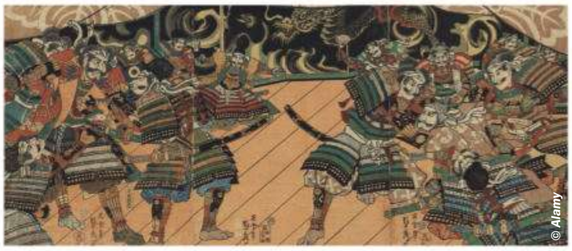
Danjo Hisahide prepares to commit suicide

© Alamy

2 July 1582

BATTLE OF YAMAZAKI 05

Akechi Mitsuhide, a retainer of Nobunaga, forces his master to commit ritual suicide and then assumes power. Nobunaga's subordinate, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, marches to confront Mitsuhide and engages him in a fierce battle. Hideyoshi wins the battle while Mitsuhide flees and is killed by bandits in the aftermath.



A war council meets before the Battle of Yamazaki

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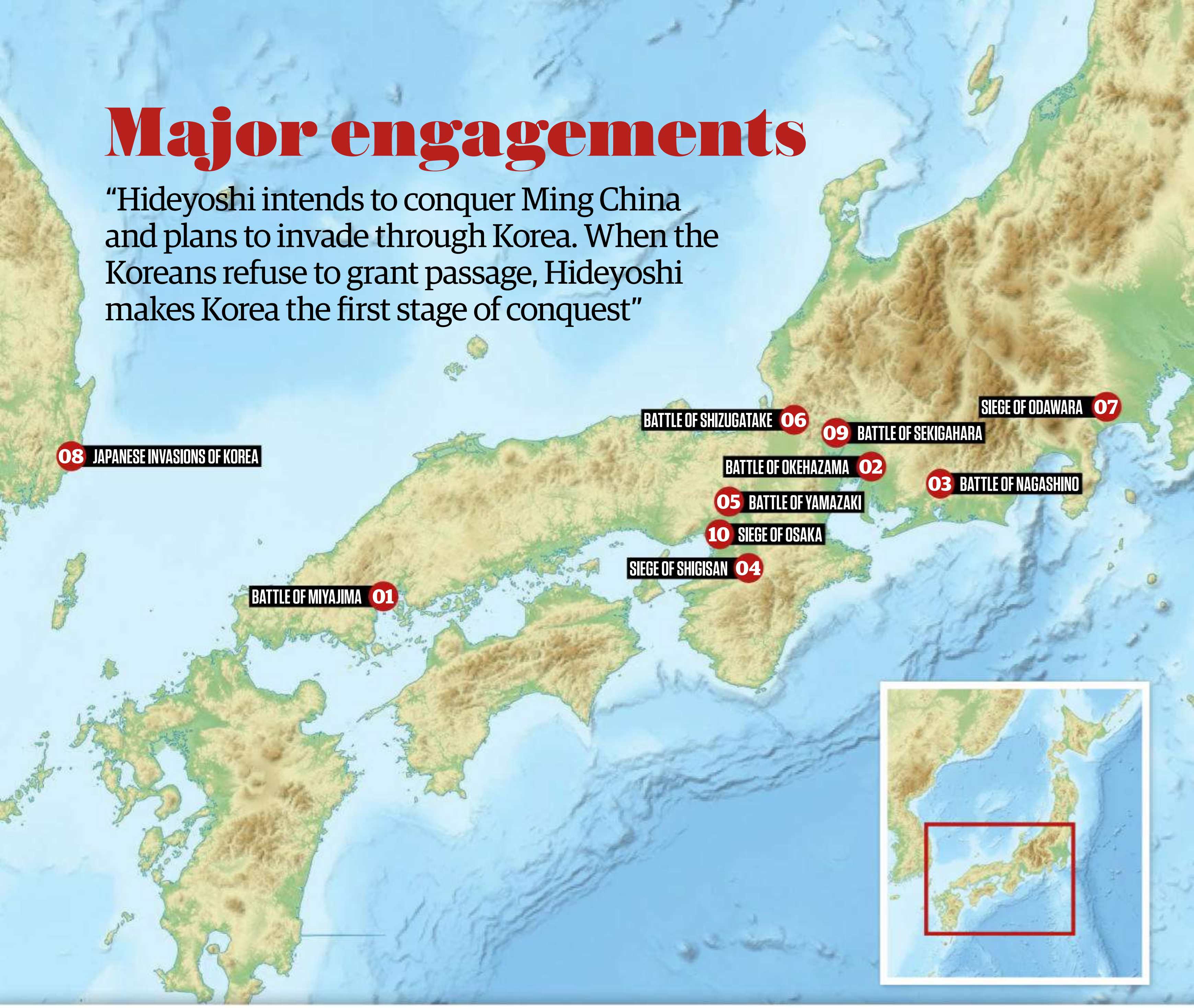
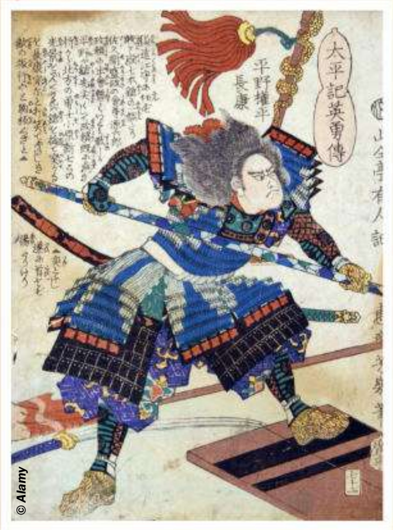
Major engagements

“Hideyoshi intends to conquer Ming China and plans to invade through Korea. When the Koreans refuse to grant passage, Hideyoshi makes Korea the first stage of conquest”


SIEGE OF ODAWARA 07
BATTLE OF SHIZUGATAKE 06
09 BATTLE OF SEKIGAHARA
08 JAPANESE INVASIONS OF KOREA
BATTLE OF OKEHAZAMA 02
03 BATTLE OF NAGASHINO
05 BATTLE OF YAMAZAKI
10 SIEGE OF OSAKA
SIEGE OF SHIGISAN 04
BATTLE OF MIYAJIMA 01

21 April 1583



© Alamy

BATTLE OF SHIZUGATAKE 06

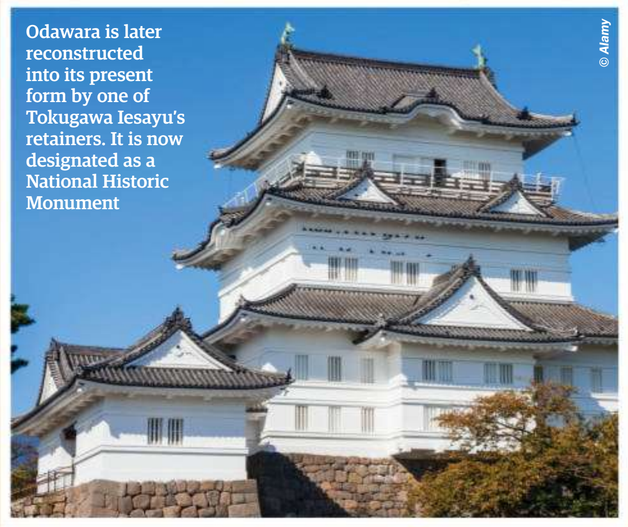
Hideyoshi is now the most powerful man in Japan but a line of his fortresses (including Shizugatake) above Lake Biwa are attacked by opposing Oda forces. Hideyoshi swiftly advances on Shizugatake and the Oda are defeated after being forced to adopt a hasty defensive posture.

Hirano Nagayasu is one of the ‘Seven Spears of Shizugatake’ who are mounted bodyguards for Hideyoshi. They successfully charge at a decisive moment of the battle and earn much fame and honour

May-August 1590

SIEGE OF ODAWARA 07

Hideyoshi aims to eliminate the threat of the Hojo clan to his power. The Hojo hastily improve the defences of Odawara Castle before Hideyoshi's forces besiege it. The siege sees very little action with the besiegers enjoying entertainments while the defenders sleep on the ramparts. The castle surrenders after three months of siege.



Odawara is later reconstructed into its present form by one of Tokugawa Iesayu's retainers. It is now designated as a National Historic Monument

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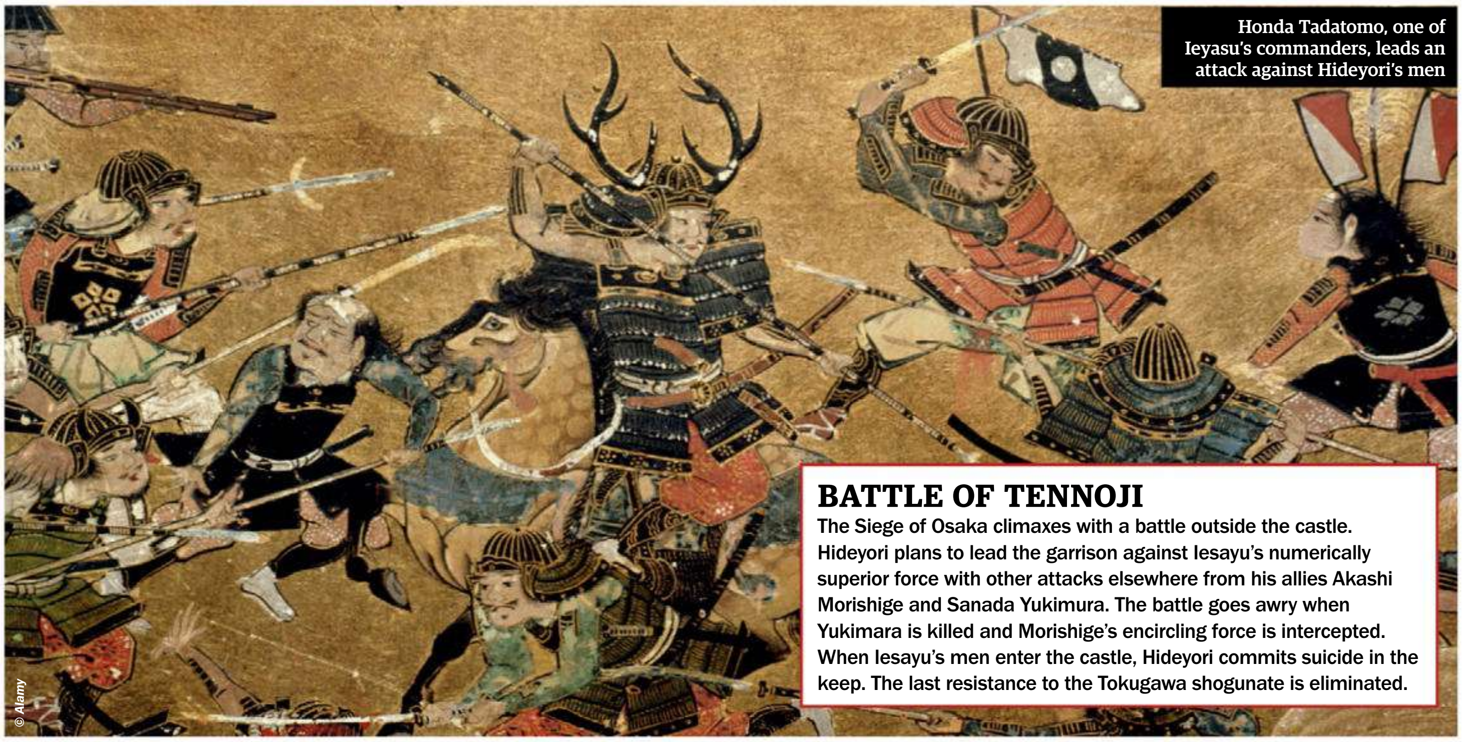

Honda Tadatomo, one of Ieyasu's commanders, leads an attack against Hideyori's men

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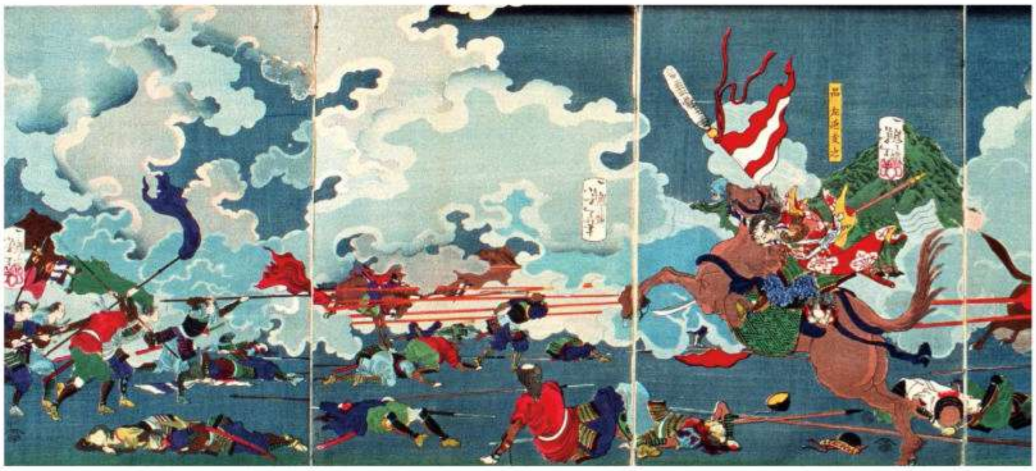
BATTLE OF TENNOJI

The Siege of Osaka climaxes with a battle outside the castle. Hideyori plans to lead the garrison against Iesayu's numerically superior force with other attacks elsewhere from his allies Akashi Morishige and Sanada Yukimura. The battle goes awry when Yukimara is killed and Morishige's encircling force is intercepted. When Iesayu's men enter the castle, Hideyori commits suicide in the keep. The last resistance to the Tokugawa shogunate is eliminated.



BATTLE OF SEKIGAHARA 09

Hideyoshi's death leads to a power struggle between Tokugawa Ieyasu and an alliance led by Ishida Mitsunari. At Sekigahara, Mitsunari is betrayed during the battle by his ally Kobyakawa Hideaki. Mitsunari is killed and Iesayu's victory eventually leads to the Tokugawa shogunate, which is the last to control Japan until 1868.

The decisions Japan's warlords made at the Battle of Sekigahara would determine the fate of their clans for centuries to come

23 May 1592-16 December 1598

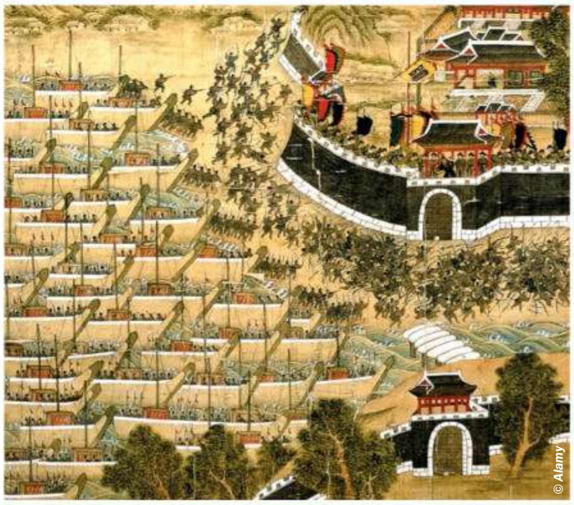
21 October 1600

8 November 1614-22 January 1615, May-June 1615

3 June 1615

JAPANESE INVASIONS OF KOREA 08

Hideyoshi intends to conquer Ming China and plans to invade through Korea. When the Koreans refuse to grant passage, Hideyoshi makes Korea the first stage of conquest. Two invasions are launched in the samurai's only assault on a foreign country. The Japanese even reach Manchuria but the Koreans and Chinese vigorously fight back. After Hideyoshi's death, Japanese armies withdraw from Korea.

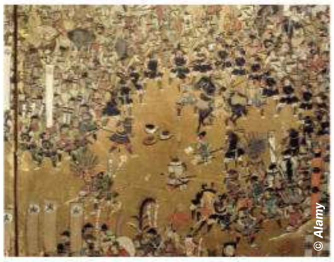


Japanese forces perform an amphibious landing before besieging the fortress at Busan, Korea

© Alamy

SIEGE OF OSAKA 10

The Tokugawa shogunate is contested by a daimyo alliance led by Hideyoshi's son Toyotomi Hideyori. His followers gather at Osaka Castle, which is then besieged by Ieyasu. After a winter bombardment a peace treaty is organised but Hideyori soon declares Ieyasu to be a rebel to the imperial throne and the siege resumes.

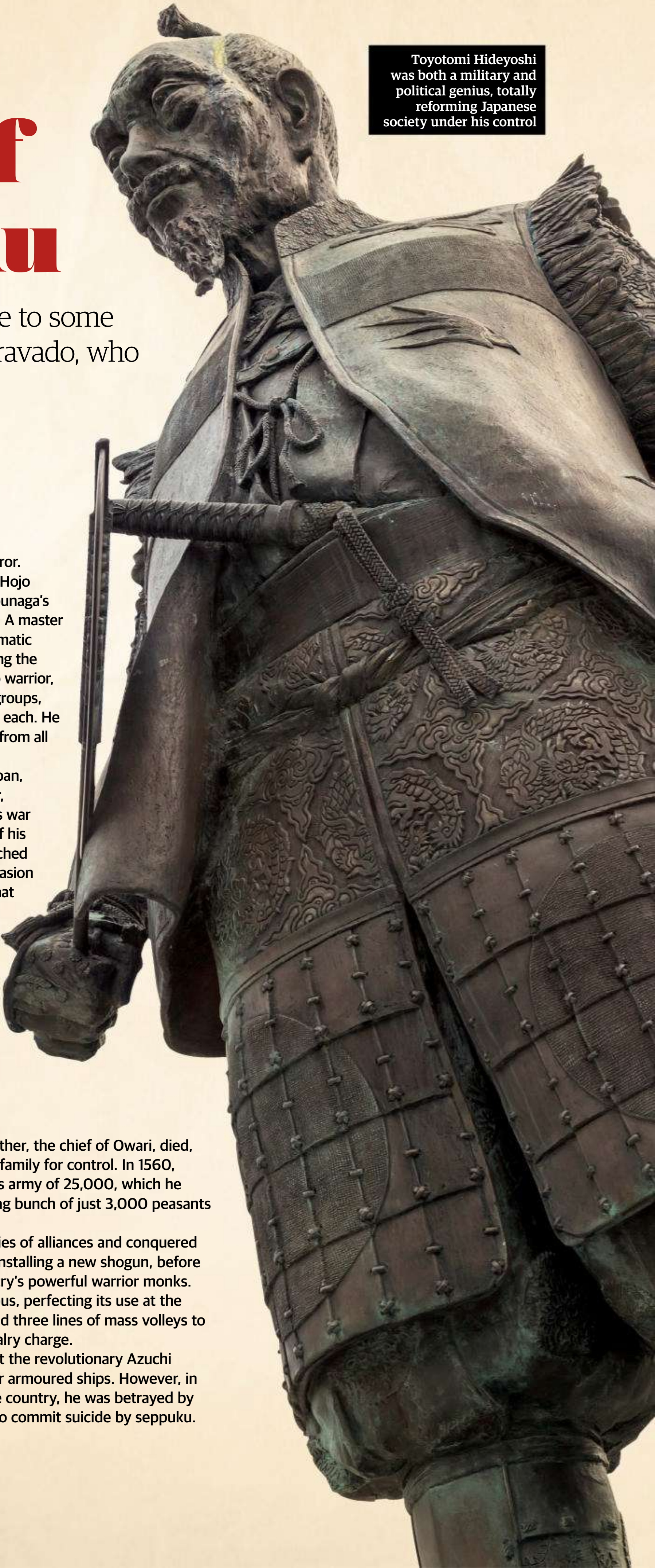


A detail of the fighting at Osaka from a folding screen that is commissioned by Kuroda Nagasama, a general who participates at the siege

© Alamy

Legends of the Sengoku

This period of perpetual warfare gave rise to some military giants - samurai, puffed up with bravado, who embodied a rigid warrior code



Toyotomi Hideyoshi was both a military and political genius, totally reforming Japanese society under his control

Toyotomi Hideyoshi

ODA AND TOYOTOMI CLANS 1558-1598

Born the son of a farmer and part-time soldier in a backwater village, Hideyoshi left home in his mid-teens, eventually joining the ranks of the up-and-coming warlord, Oda Nobunaga, in 1558.

Originally serving as Nobunaga's sandal bearer, he rose through the ranks on his wit, charm and martial merit – eventually proving himself a spectacular general. He was instrumental in Nobunaga's conquest, helping his lord seize a third of the country – for which he was awarded his own fief. When Nobunaga was betrayed in 1582 and committed seppuku, an outraged Hideyoshi avenged his master at lightning speed – killing the traitor at the Battle of Yamazaki, and cementing his own position as Nobunaga's spiritual successor. After a brief conflict with Tokugawa Ieyasu, the latter acquiesced. Eager to reinforce his might with the right to rule, Hideyoshi had himself adopted into the Fujiwara clan – which had held a monopoly over the imperial regency – allowing him to become the first ever non-Fujiwara regent, before installing a puppet emperor. After crushing the Shimazu and Hojo clans, Hideyoshi completed Nobunaga's spectacular unification of Japan. A master administrator, he oversaw a dramatic centralisation of power, reforming the tax system, dividing society into warrior, merchant, artisan and peasant groups, setting strict rules and rights for each. He went on to confiscate weapons from all farmers and warrior monks.

Having delivered peace to Japan, fuelled by delusions of grandeur, Hideyoshi directed the country's war apparatus outwards. Bragging of his plans to conquer China, he launched an enormous 200,000-man invasion of Korea in 1592 – a campaign that turned into a stalemate once China came to its vassal's aid. Growing increasingly erratic in old age, Hideyoshi died in 1598, bringing his campaign to a rapid close, and ushering in a last deadly stage of civil war.

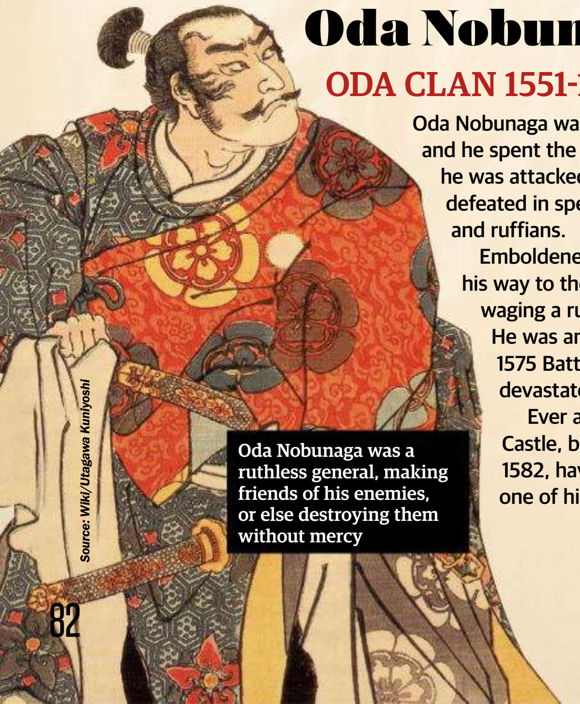
Oda Nobunaga

ODA CLAN 1551-1582

Oda Nobunaga was just a teenager when his father, the chief of Owari, died, and he spent the next eight years battling his family for control. In 1560, he was attacked by a neighbouring warlord's army of 25,000, which he defeated in spectacular fashion with a ragtag bunch of just 3,000 peasants and ruffians.

Emboldened, Nobunaga struck up a series of alliances and conquered his way to the capital in just eight years, installing a new shogun, before waging a ruthless war against the country's powerful warrior monks. He was an early adopter of the arquebus, perfecting its use at the 1575 Battle of Nagashino. Here he used three lines of mass volleys to devastate the Takeda's notorious cavalry charge.

Ever an innovator, he not only built the revolutionary Azuchi Castle, but designed Japan's first ever armoured ships. However, in 1582, having conquered a third of the country, he was betrayed by one of his own vassals – forcing him to commit suicide by seppuku.



Oda Nobunaga was a ruthless general, making friends of his enemies, or else destroying them without mercy

Source: Wiki/Utagawa Kuniyoshi

© Alamy

Tokugawa Ieyasu

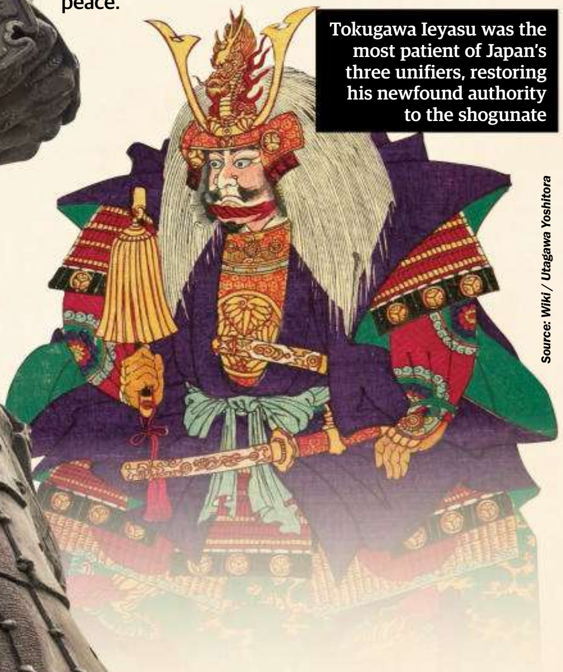
TOKUGAWA SHOGUNATE 1558-1615

Tokugawa Ieyasu was thrust onto the grand stage after his lord was killed while invading Oda Nobunaga in 1560. The two young generals struck up an alliance, and as Nobunaga emerged the pre-eminent warlord, Ieyasu grew immensely wealthy and powerful – dealing the Takeda their final death knell in 1582.

After Nobunaga's suicide, Ieyasu briefly fought his successor Hideyoshi, before swearing fealty to him.

Under Hideyoshi's rule, Ieyasu was the country's wealthiest lord, ruling the eight provinces of Kanto, bringing in 2.5 million koku annually – food for 2.5 million people; more than Hideyoshi himself. When Hideyoshi died, although he appointed his five-year-old son Hideyori his successor, as the senior-most member of the council of elders, Ieyasu finally made a bid for power himself – culminating in the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, where he emerged victorious.

Three years later, following decades of patient political manipulations, Ieyasu was declared shogun, formalising his authority over the country he and his two successors had fought so hard to unite. After centuries of war, Japan was finally at peace.



Tokugawa Ieyasu was the most patient of Japan's three unifiers, restoring his newfound authority to the shogunate

Source: Wiki / Utagawa Yoshitora

Kato Kiyomasa

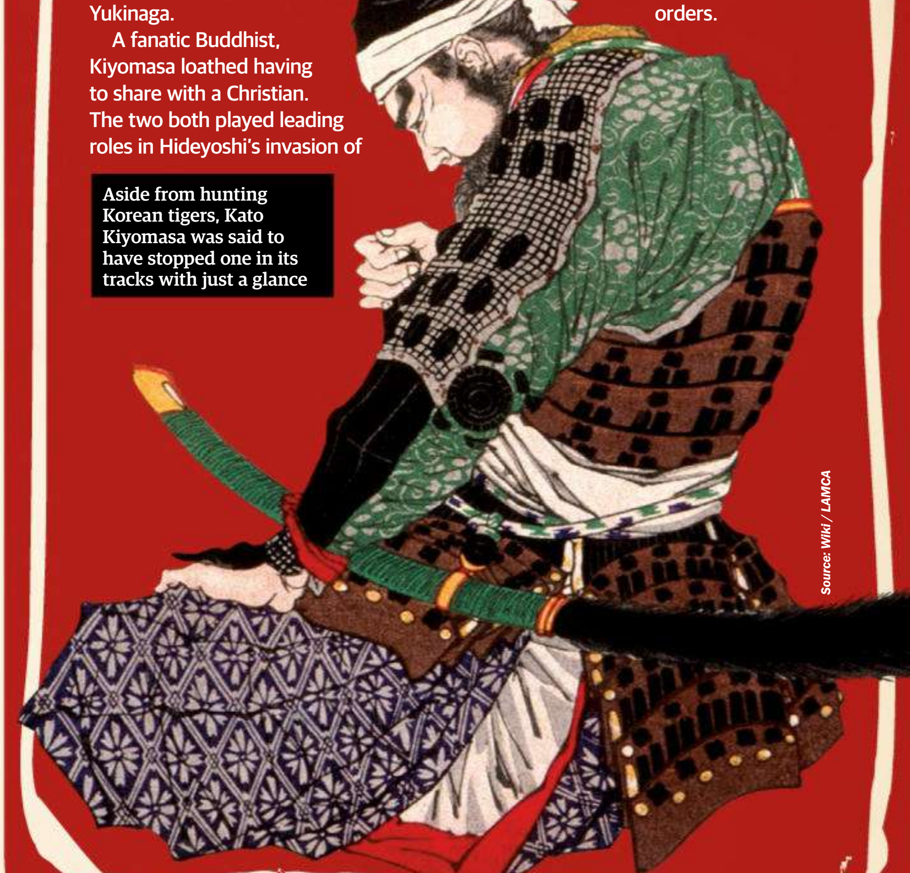
TOYOTOMI AND TOKUGAWA CLANS 1573-1611

Kato Kiyomasa was raised in the fire of war, by Hideyoshi himself. In 1583, at the Battle of Shizugatake he fought on horseback, killing so many with his cross-bladed spear, he was dubbed one of Hideyoshi's 'Seven Spears of Shizugatake'.

Hideyoshi rewarded his brilliance with a fief in Higo, where he developed a long-standing rivalry with another of Hideyoshi's favourites, Konishi 'Agostinho' Yukinaga.

A fanatic Buddhist, Kiyomasa loathed having to share with a Christian. The two both played leading roles in Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea, where Kiyomasa became the only general to push all the way into China itself.

After Hideyoshi's death, he returned to Japan, siding with the Tokugawa, while Konishi picked the opposing side. After the battle of Sekigahara, Konishi was executed, and Kiyomasa seized his holdings. Ever loyal, he sought to protect Hideyoshi's son and Ieyasu's rival, Hideyori, from harm, but died during negotiations – perhaps poisoned on Ieyasu's orders.



Aside from hunting Korean tigers, Kato Kiyomasa was said to have stopped one in its tracks with just a glance

Source: Wiki / LAMCA

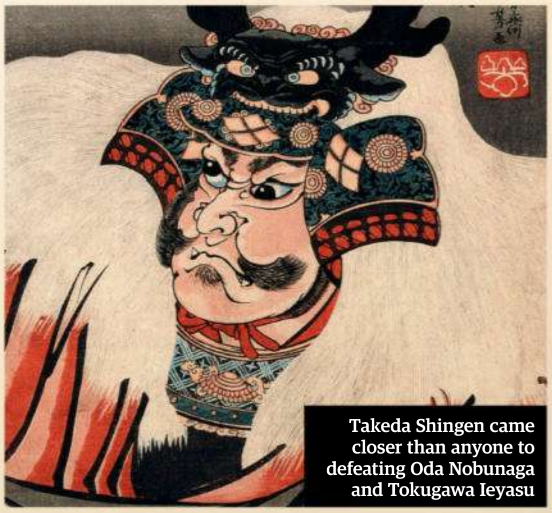
Takeda Shingen

TAKEDA CLAN 1536-1573

Born in 1521, Takeda Shingen proved his brilliance at the age of 15, using subterfuge to capture a fortress his father had failed to take by brute force. Five years later, he flat-out seized the province of Kai for himself, leading the Takeda clan to bold new heights.

Brutal in victory, he entered a legendary rivalry with the neighbouring Uesugi clan, fighting five successive battles at Kawanakajima. He not only boasted the most powerful cavalry charge in Japan, but was an early adopter of firearms, hiring hundreds of arquebusiers to tip the odds in his favour. A brilliant warrior, he even engaged in single combat against the Uesugi leader, Uesugi Kenshin.

After allying with Oda Nobunaga he was convinced by the shogun to attack the upstart warlord, dealing him and Tokugawa Ieyasu a devastating defeat with a masterclass in cavalry warfare at the Battle of Mikatagahara. However, he died soon after, leaving his clan's fortune in the hands of his less capable son, Katsuyori.



Takeda Shingen came closer than anyone to defeating Oda Nobunaga and Tokugawa Ieyasu

Source: Wiki / Utagawa Kuniyoshi

Shogun showdowns

Broadcaster and author of *A Brief History Of Japan*, Jonathan Clements, shares his thoughts on the changing nature of power, authority and legitimacy during the Sengoku period

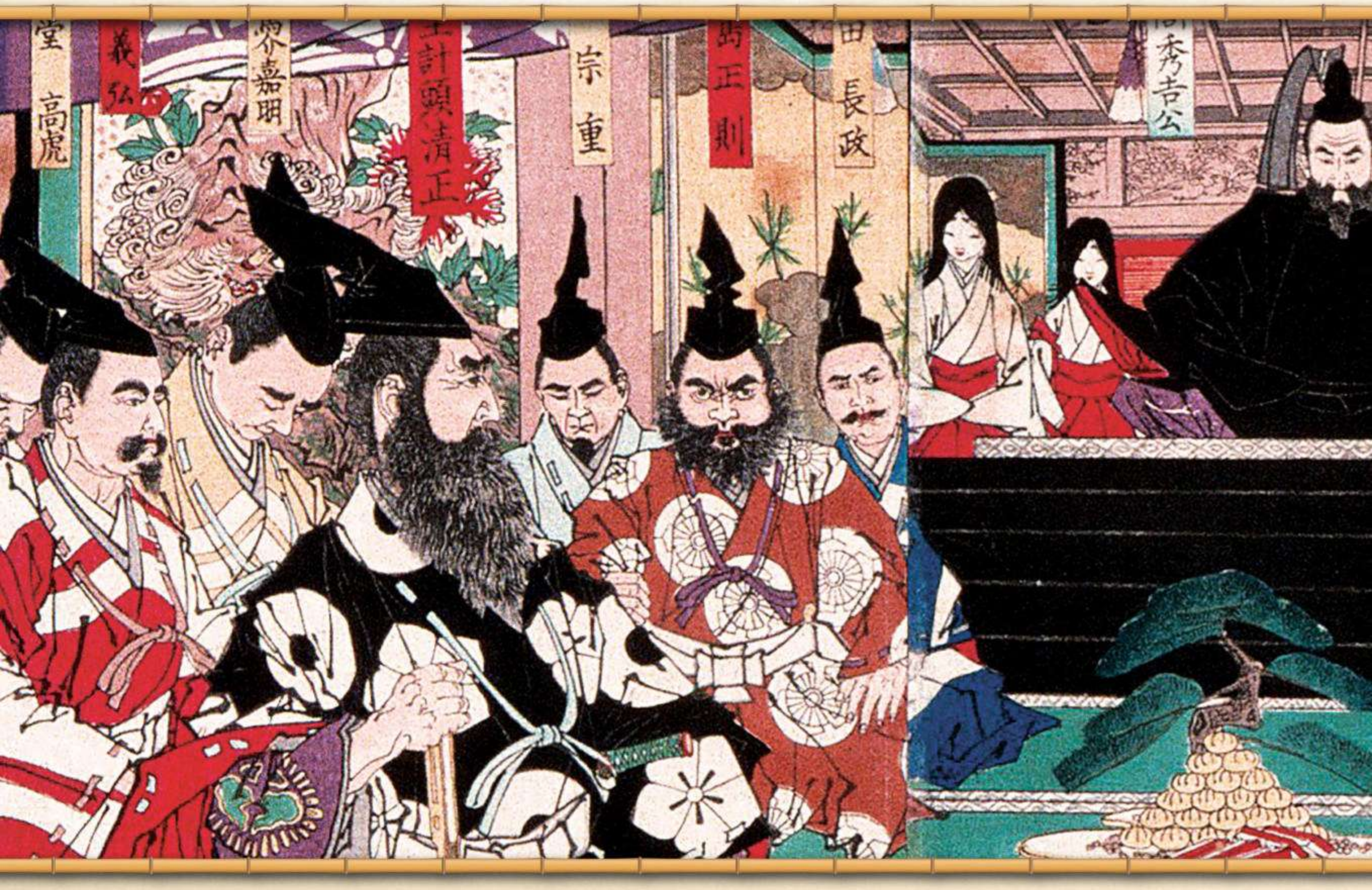
What was the nature of the shogunate during the Sengoku period?

Our more 'modern' sense of what the word 'shogun' means comes in the late Heian period, when you have emperors and retired emperors prepared to use the samurai houses as pawns in their own struggle over power. So, a shogunate gets confirmed because an emperor wants some samurai muscle, and it's a title that can either reflect who the top dog is among the samurai, or who the top dog is among the contending emperors and retired emperors. We do get several occasions where 'shogun' itself becomes a figurehead position, because the real power is somewhere else, and I think that's what you get with the Ashikaga collapse.

Throughout the Sengoku period, what were the most potent new sources of authority?

After the Portuguese arrive on Tanegashima, the Japanese suddenly acquire access to firearms, and that transforms the nature of modern warfare. The samurai hated matchlocks, because you could literally pick some peasant at random and show him how to use it, and you could have him battle-ready in two or three days.

A lot of the politicking in the Sengoku period often cloaks machinations behind the scenes about who has access to foreign contacts. Sometimes, it's about religion – either for real or for show. You get the Christian daimyo, particularly in the south, striking deals with the Jesuits over silk trade and arms, and you get entire domains converting en masse to Christianity. Sometimes it's truly heartfelt belief from people who are prepared to die for it, and



that really spooks the samurai, because the last thing they want is a bunch of fractious domains, united by a shared religious belief, paying homage to a foreign leader.

How successful was Hideyoshi's attempt to legitimise his authority?

I think the most important issue there is that Hideyoshi didn't become shogun. He's a new man, he can fight and claw his way up the ranks, and amass power and wealth, but he'll never be one of the old samurai families.

Class and old money always try to hang on. There were periods when the samurai were just expendable pawns, used by the elite in Kyoto to fight over distant holdings and to keep themselves on top in court politics. The samurai era, such as we know it, begins when those pawns suddenly come back and demand to be let into the capital, to enjoy the court life themselves. They take over the court, they take over the capital, and they ruin it.

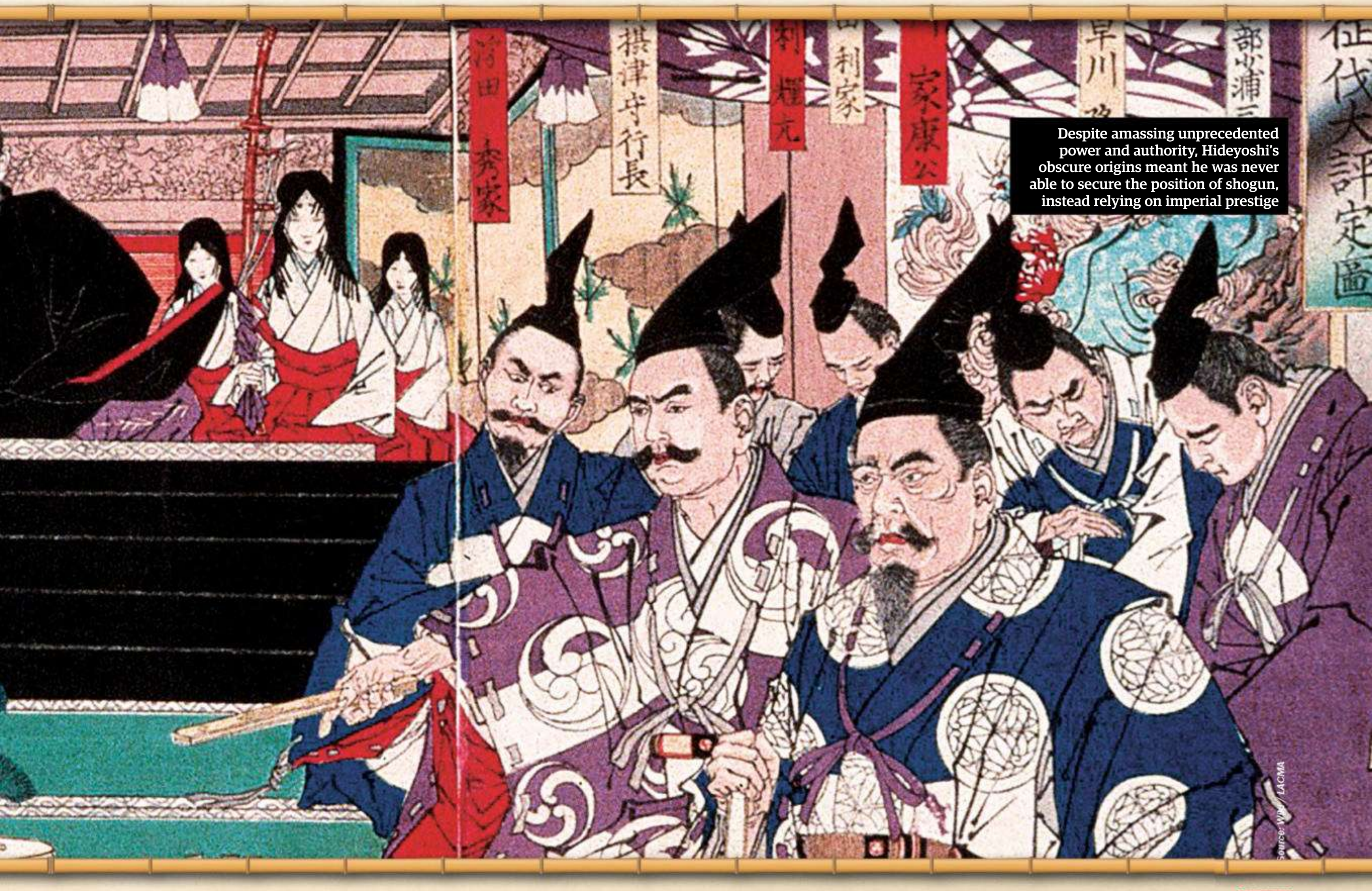
> "After the Portuguese arrive on Tanegashima, the Japanese suddenly acquire access to firearms, and that transforms the nature of modern warfare"

Was the shogunate stronger at the end of the Sengoku period?

The Tokugawa Shogunate was stronger, I think, because of the absolute lock-down that Ieyasu imposed on everything. He could switch out lords and shutter provincial ruling houses. He could, and did, order only a single castle, so there was nowhere for people to fortify if they rebelled. When the Shimabara Rebellion broke out in 1637, you have the bizarre sight of the warlords in the next domain literally waiting on the border, unable to leave their own province to make a counter-attack until specific permission arrives from Edo. Ieyasu and his successors shut out foreign influences, to the best of their ability. They kept all the samurai dancing around them with their compulsory attendance, which sapped up to 30 per cent of a domain's annual budget and ensured that there were always family hostages in Edo as collateral against rebellion.

What do you think the shogunate would have looked like with Hideyori in charge?

If he had won, possibly Edo would have declined, and the centre of power in Japan would have been Osaka instead. But then the Kanto plain would have formed a potential power base for some new upstart, and we would have been plunged into another bunch of regional conflicts. It is just speculation, but maybe we should consider the degree to which geography created the way Japanese history would unfold during the Tokugawa period. The Tokugawa had Edo, which was the largest area of exploitable land. They were able to create a new centre for themselves. So, it should perhaps come as no surprise that in the 19th century, when the emperor was 'restored' and the Tokugawa finally brought down, the new official power centre of Japan was declared in Edo, and it was renamed To-kyo, the eastern capital.



Despite amassing unprecedented power and authority, Hideyoshi's obscure origins meant he was never able to secure the position of shogun, instead relying on imperial prestige

Source: Wiki / LACMA

Armour, blades & gunpowder

Soldiers of the Sengoku period used a variety of weapons and protective equipment that reflected the military and cultural changes within Japan

Sengoku Japan was known as the 'time of battles' and the martial character of the Japanese clans who fought each other represented a watershed in military technology. Many aspects of soldiering were still medieval with an emphasis on swords, shields and armour. However, the European Renaissance arrived on Japanese shores with the Portuguese and they introduced artillery and firearms that would revolutionise the way warfare conducted on the island and abroad.

ARMOUR

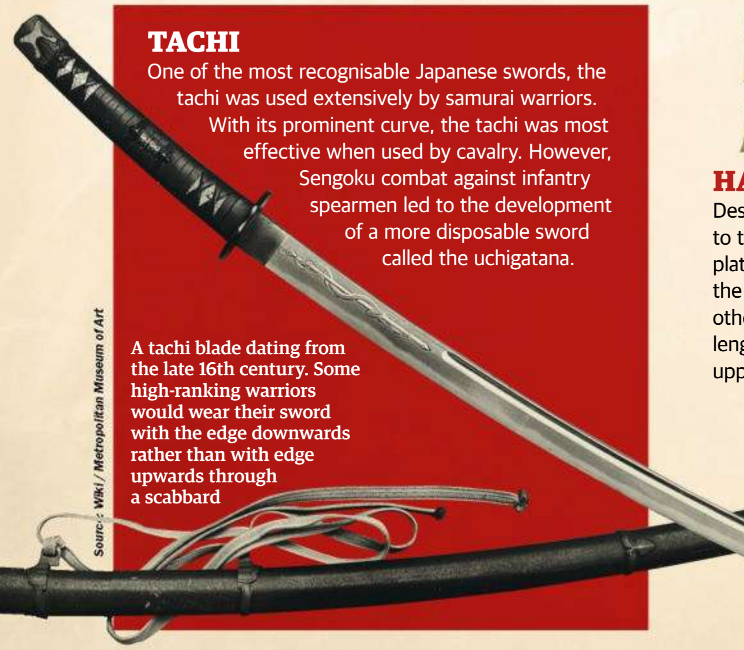
Highly distinctive and recognised as some of the most famous military protective clothing ever created, Japanese armour was noticeably elaborate. Nevertheless, Sengoku armourers also needed to quickly produce practical suits to match the demands of the battlefield.

SODE

These large, rectangular pieces are made from iron and acted as shoulder protection. Formed into scales, sode could also be made from leather and protected the arms from the elbows to the shoulders.

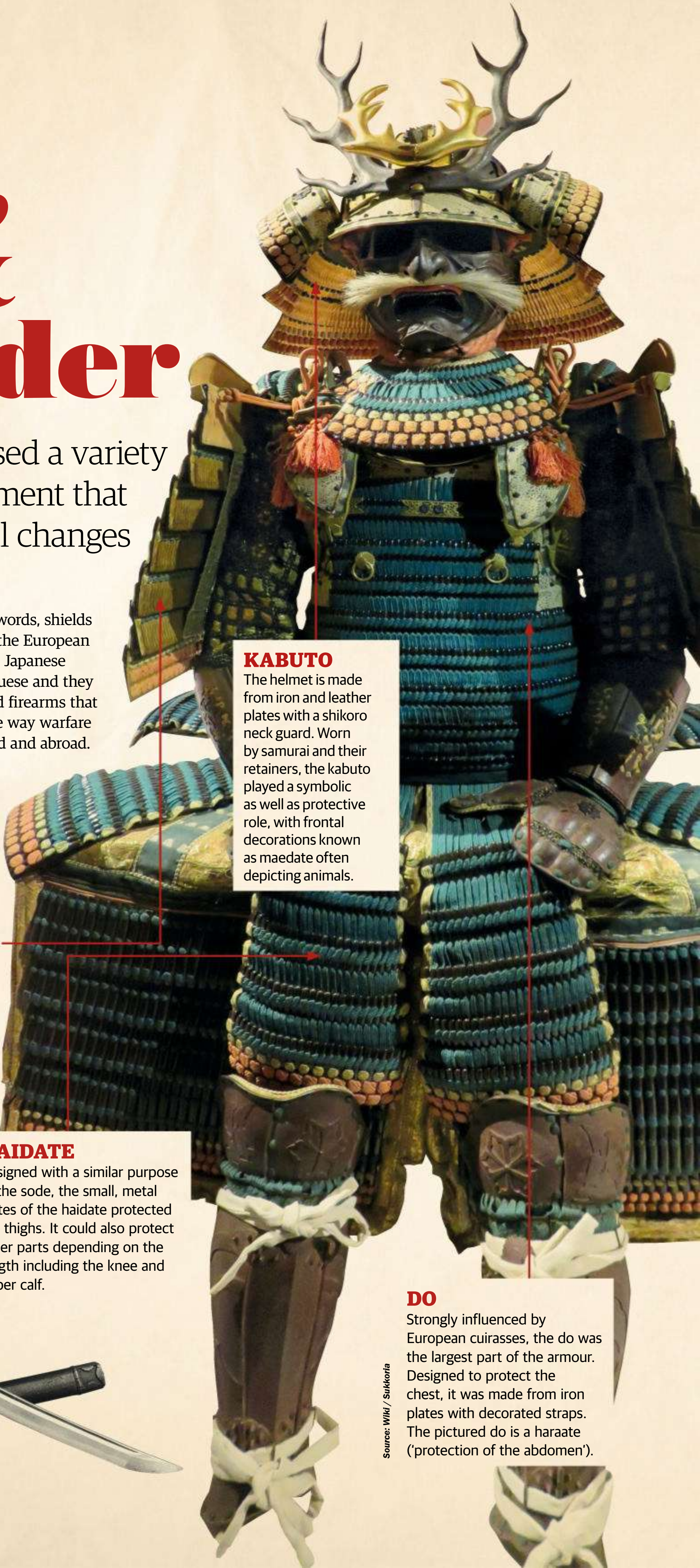
TACHI

One of the most recognisable Japanese swords, the tachi was used extensively by samurai warriors. With its prominent curve, the tachi was most effective when used by cavalry. However, Sengoku combat against infantry spearmen led to the development of a more disposable sword called the uchigatana.



A tachi blade dating from the late 16th century. Some high-ranking warriors would wear their sword with the edge downwards rather than with edge upwards through a scabbard

Source: Wiki / Metropolitan Museum of Art



KABUTO

The helmet is made from iron and leather plates with a shikoro neck guard. Worn by samurai and their retainers, the kabuto played a symbolic as well as protective role, with frontal decorations known as maedate often depicting animals.

HAIDATE

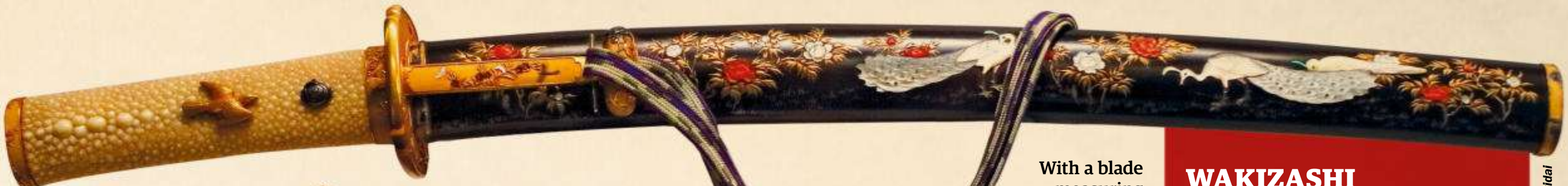
Designed with a similar purpose to the sode, the small, metal plates of the haidate protected the thighs. It could also protect other parts depending on the length including the knee and upper calf.

DO

Strongly influenced by European cuirasses, the do was the largest part of the armour. Designed to protect the chest, it was made from iron plates with decorated straps. The pictured do is a haraate ('protection of the abdomen').

Source: Wiki / Sukkoria

Armour, blades & gunpowder

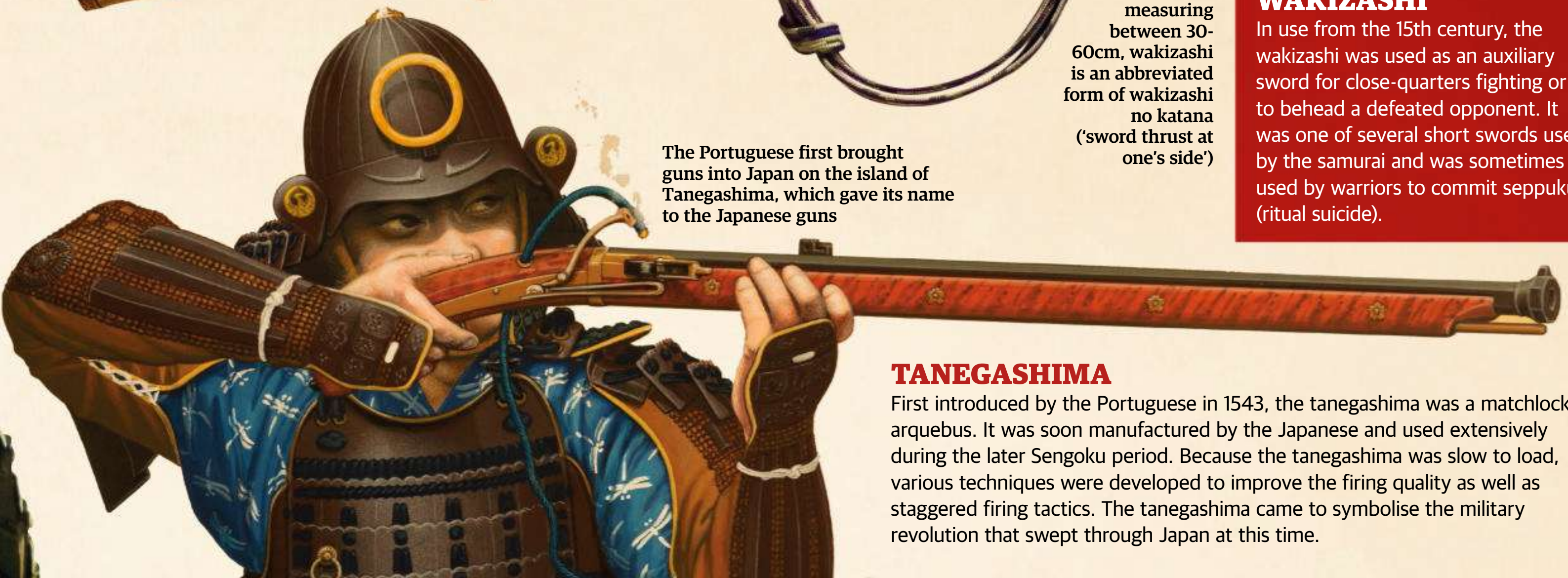


Source: Wiki / Kakidai

With a blade measuring between 30-60cm, wakizashi is an abbreviated form of wakizashi no katana ('sword thrust at one's side')

WAKIZASHI

In use from the 15th century, the wakizashi was used as an auxiliary sword for close-quarters fighting or to behead a defeated opponent. It was one of several short swords used by the samurai and was sometimes used by warriors to commit seppuku (ritual suicide).

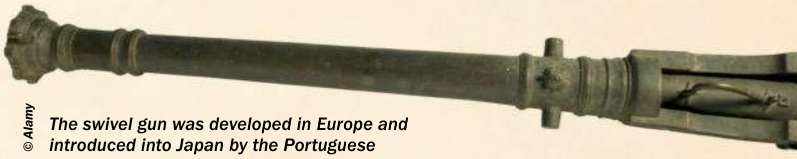


The Portuguese first brought guns into Japan on the island of Tanegashima, which gave its name to the Japanese guns

© Alamy

TANEGASHIMA

First introduced by the Portuguese in 1543, the tanegashima was a matchlock arquebus. It was soon manufactured by the Japanese and used extensively during the later Sengoku period. Because the tanegashima was slow to load, various techniques were developed to improve the firing quality as well as staggered firing tactics. The tanegashima came to symbolise the military revolution that swept through Japan at this time.



The swivel gun was developed in Europe and introduced into Japan by the Portuguese

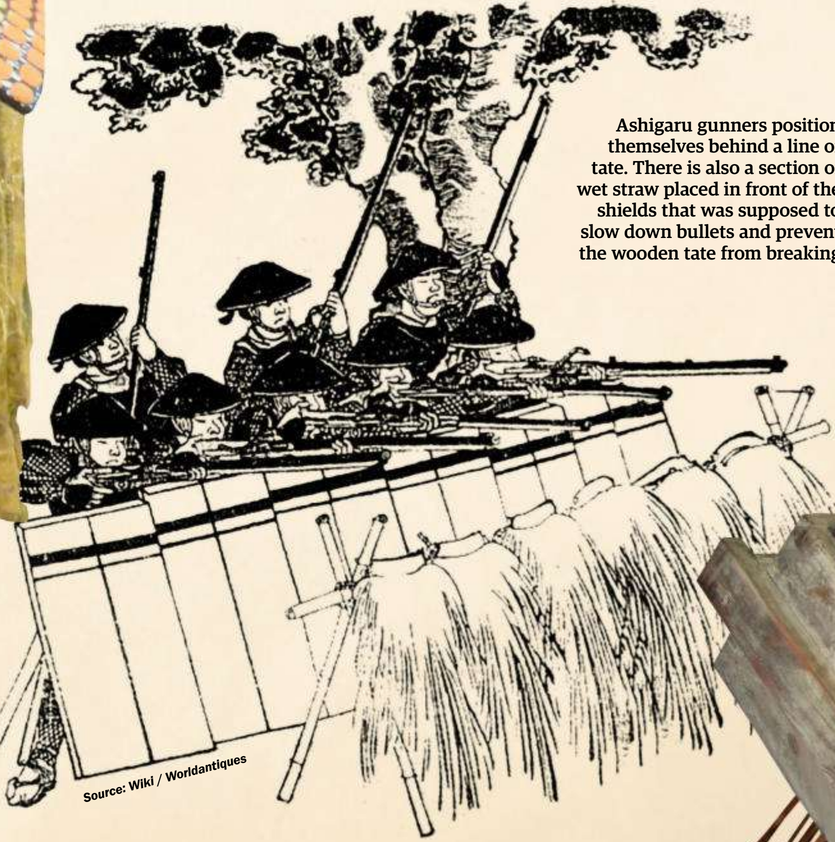
© Alamy

BREECH-LOADING SWIVEL GUN

Introduced into Japan by the Portuguese from the 1550s, this gun had a high rate of fire and swivel for easy rotation. Daimyo Otomo Sorin used them at the Siege of Moji in 1561 and they were later deployed at the Battle of Takjo in 1587.

TATE

Made from wood, riveted iron plates or even lacquered rawhide, tate were rectangular shields. They were used by ashigaru infantry units. Firearms and cannon could easily destroy a tate but new designs were developed to cover ranged units on the battlefield. The shields were often supplemented by taketaba, which were thick bundles of rolled bamboo.

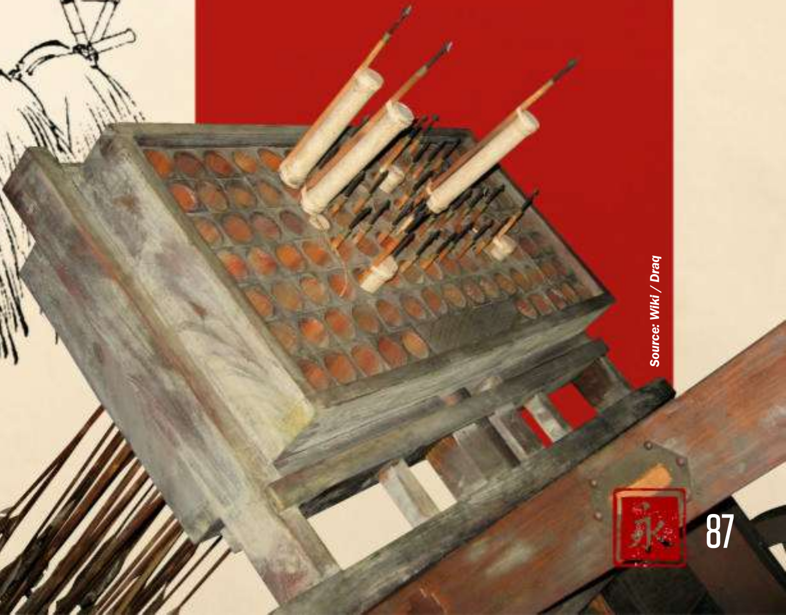


Ashigaru gunners position themselves behind a line of tate. There is also a section of wet straw placed in front of the shields that was supposed to slow down bullets and prevent the wooden tate from breaking

Source: Wiki / Worldantiques

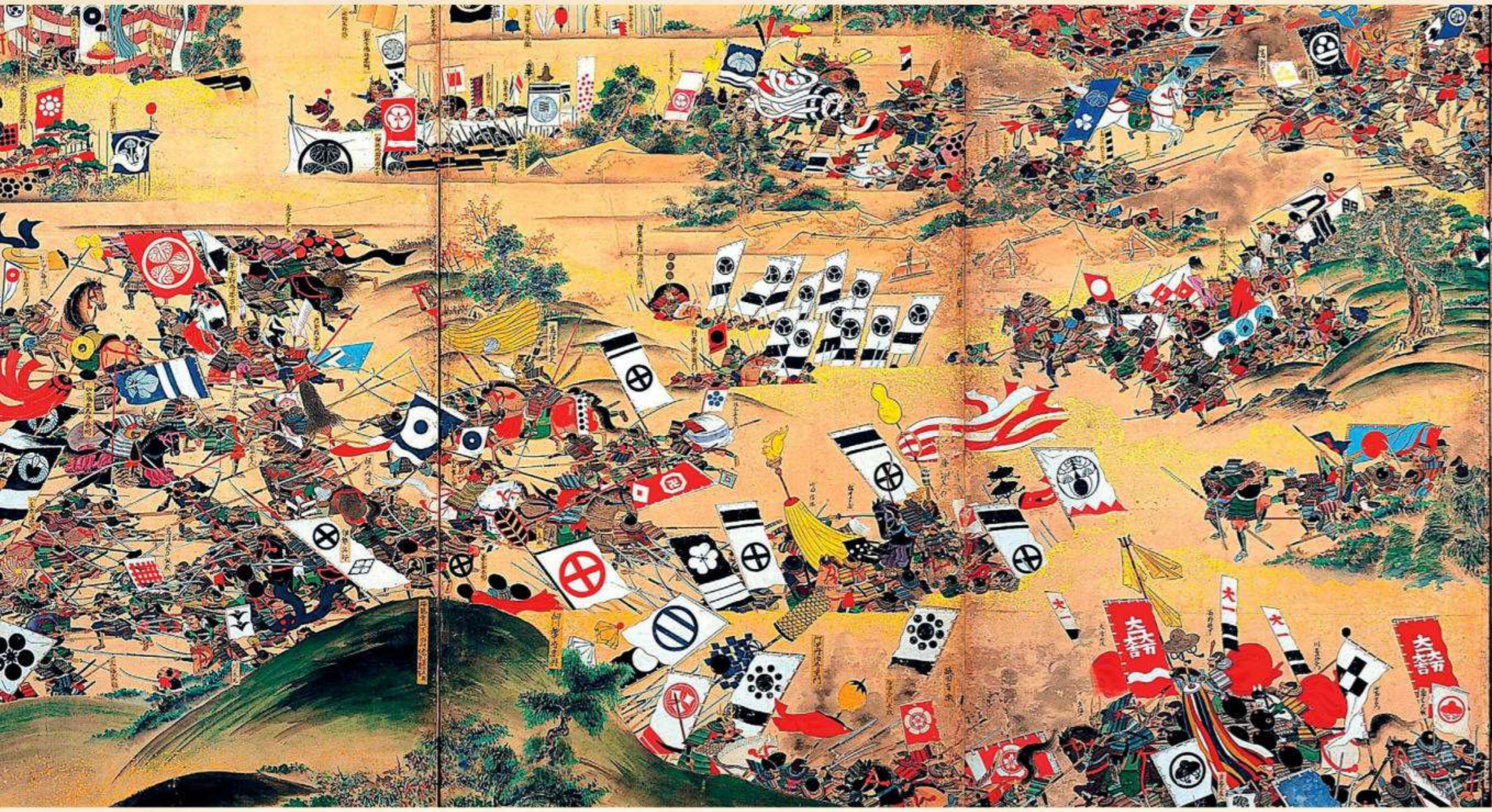
HWACHA

The hwacha were early multiple rocket launchers developed in Korea. Some could fire 100 rocket arrows or 200 small 'Chontong' bullets. They were extensively used by the Koreans during the Japanese invasions of the 1590s. At the Battle of Haengju, 3,400 Koreans repelled 30,000 Japanese with the help of 40 hwacha.



A reconstruction of a Korean hwacha. At Haengju, the samurai infantry inadvertently assisted the hwachas' performance by advancing in dense battle formations

Source: Wiki / Draq



Sekigahara

In 1600, after 150 years of perpetual violence, Japan's warlords united behind two coalitions for a samurai battle to end them all

When Toyotomi Hideyoshi died in 1598, he left a unified Japan in the hands of his five-year-old son, Hideyori – appointing a council of regents. However, as the samurai returned home from the disastrous invasion of Korea, the regents split into two factions – one led by the Hideyori loyalist, Ishida Mitsunari, and the other by their senior-most member, Tokugawa Ieyasu.

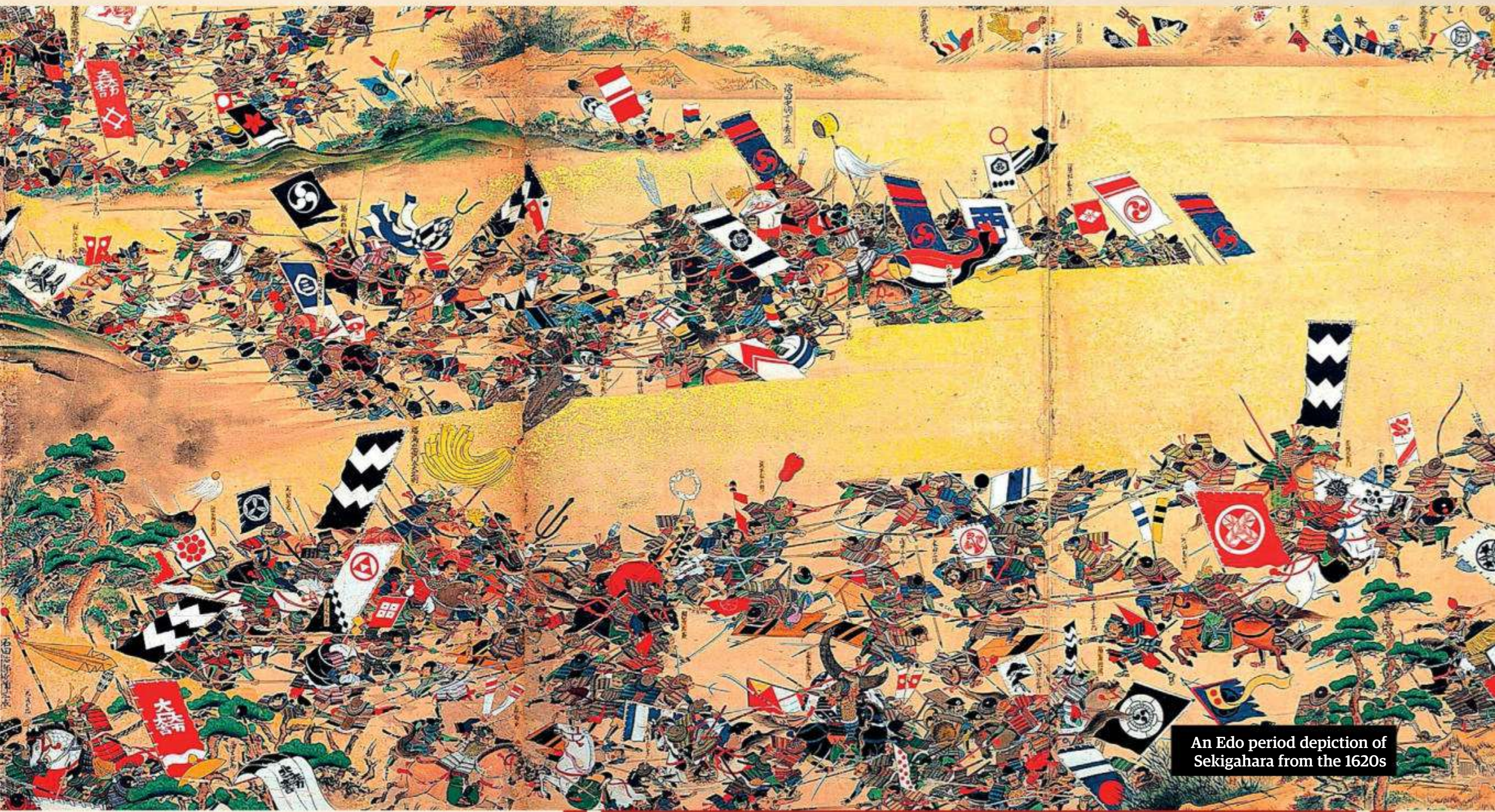
Having spent decades helping to unify the realm, Ieyasu had sacrificed too much to leave it in the hands of a child. In August 1599, Japan's warlords were forced to pick a side. After a series of sieges, the two coalitions finally met along the Nakasendo Road.

DRAWING BLOOD

Mitsunari's Western Army arrived first, setting up favourable positions along a foggy mountain valley. Utilising a crane-like formation, he planned to draw the Eastern Army in, before attacking both flanks, and then the rear, sealing the enemy in a rectangular tomb. With Ieyasu fielding 88,888 soldiers, and Mitsunari 81,890, this would be a battle of epic proportions. Among the most unpredictable of allies was Kobayakawa Hideaki, a 19-year-old general, and Hideyoshi's foster son. Though he bore a grudge against Mitsunari for disrespecting his efforts in Korea, he assured him he would join his side, once the signal fire was lit.

As the fog lifted at 8.00am, Ieyasu ordered the attack. The gregarious general Ii Naomasa took it upon himself to initiate hostilities, hurtling into the heart of the Western Army, followed by his legendary Red Devils – 3,600 shock cavalry dressed in red lacquered armour, with red-shafted lances. They punched all the way through to their enemy's rear line. The Red Devils were supported by Eastern Army arquebusiers, firing volleys, as 20,000 of Tokugawa's men rushed into the fray. As the two sides clashed, Mitsunari wheeled out five cannons, pushing the Easterners back.

As more generals hurtled themselves down from the mountaintops, crashing into the Western flank, one soldier wrote, "Musket fire and the shouts echoed from the heavens and shook the earth. The black smoke rose, making the day as night." With only 35,000 of his men committed so far, Mitsunari asked his rearguard, led by the elderly Shimazu Yoshihiro, to join in, only to be told, "In this battle, each unit must look to its own affairs and fight its own battles with all its might. There is no time to be concerned with the affairs of others." Just as the two armies lined up perfectly, he finally lit his signal flare – it was time for his allies to smash into the enemy's two flanks. To his horror, however, the



An Edo period depiction of Sekigahara from the 1620s

© Alamy

19-year-old Hideaki, and his 15,000 men, did not budge – paralysing several more allies.

THE VICTORS AND THE VANQUISHED

Ieyasu sensed the battle would be won and lost on Hideaki's next move. Desperate to force the young man's hand, he had his gunners fire. It worked. Hideaki leaped onto his horse and ordered his men to attack the Western Army's flank. There was little the grizzled general Otani Yoshitsugu could do, but order a sobbing retainer to cut off and hide his head from the enemy. Other Western generals followed Hideaki's lead, turning on Mitsunari, until his forces were utterly decimated and routed. Ieyasu finally donned his helmet, booming, "After victory, tighten the cords of your helmet."

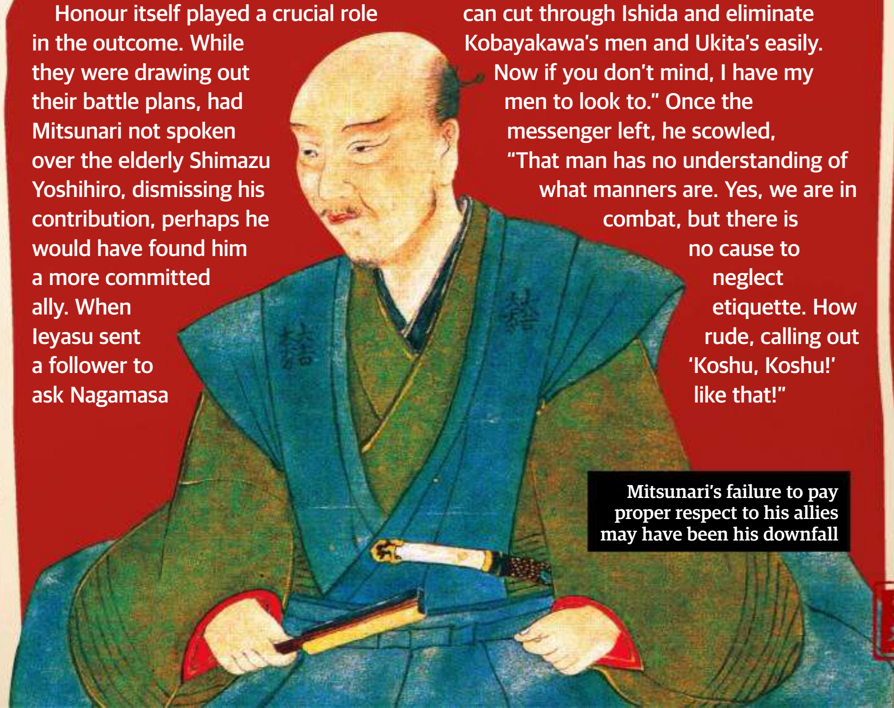
After Sekigahara, Ieyasu put his enemies to the sword, forgiving those who had returned to his side during the battle, and generously rewarding his loyal supporters. As a Christian, Konishi Yukinaga tuned down the chance to commit ritualistic suicide by seppuku. Mitsunari was not even offered the opportunity – both were beheaded in Kyoto. In 1603, Ieyasu was appointed the shogun, and 12 years later, launched an almighty siege of Hideyori's castle at Osaka – compelling him to commit suicide, and cementing a dynasty that would rule over a peaceful domain for centuries.

Honour on the battlefield

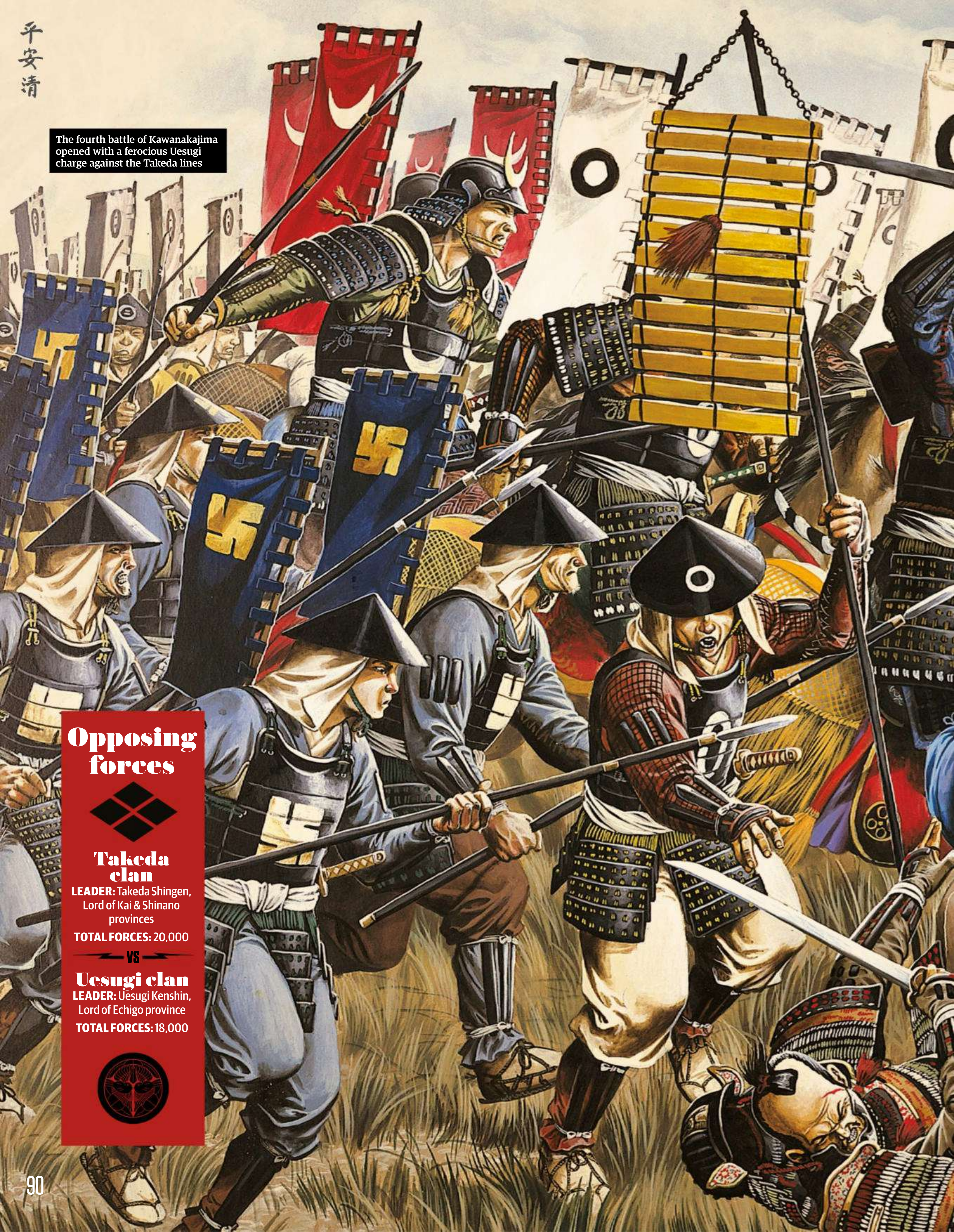
For samurai, maintaining proper manners and etiquette was even more important on the battlefield

The samurai commitment to formality and manners bordered on the surreal. Although Ieyasu wanted his general Fukushima Masanori to lead the charge, glory notwithstanding, Naomasa felt it was not appropriate for a man who had been so close to Hideyoshi to strike the first blow against the forces of his son.

Honour itself played a crucial role in the outcome. While they were drawing out their battle plans, had Mitsunari not spoken over the elderly Shimazu Yoshihiro, dismissing his contribution, perhaps he would have found him a more committed ally. When Ieyasu sent a follower to ask Nagamasa if the young Hideaki was going to turn in his favour, the panicked messenger made the mistake of addressing the high-ranking samurai by his province name, calling, "Koshu, Koshu, do you know, will Lord Hideaki join us or not?" With typical samurai swagger, Nagamasa spat, "Even if he doesn't join us, we can cut through Ishida and eliminate Kobayakawa's men and Ukita's easily. Now if you don't mind, I have my men to look to." Once the messenger left, he scowled, "That man has no understanding of what manners are. Yes, we are in combat, but there is no cause to neglect etiquette. How rude, calling out 'Koshu, Koshu!' like that!"



Mitsunari's failure to pay proper respect to his allies may have been his downfall



The fourth battle of Kawanakajima opened with a ferocious Uesugi charge against the Takeda lines

Opposing forces

Takeda clan

LEADER: Takeda Shingen, Lord of Kai & Shinano provinces

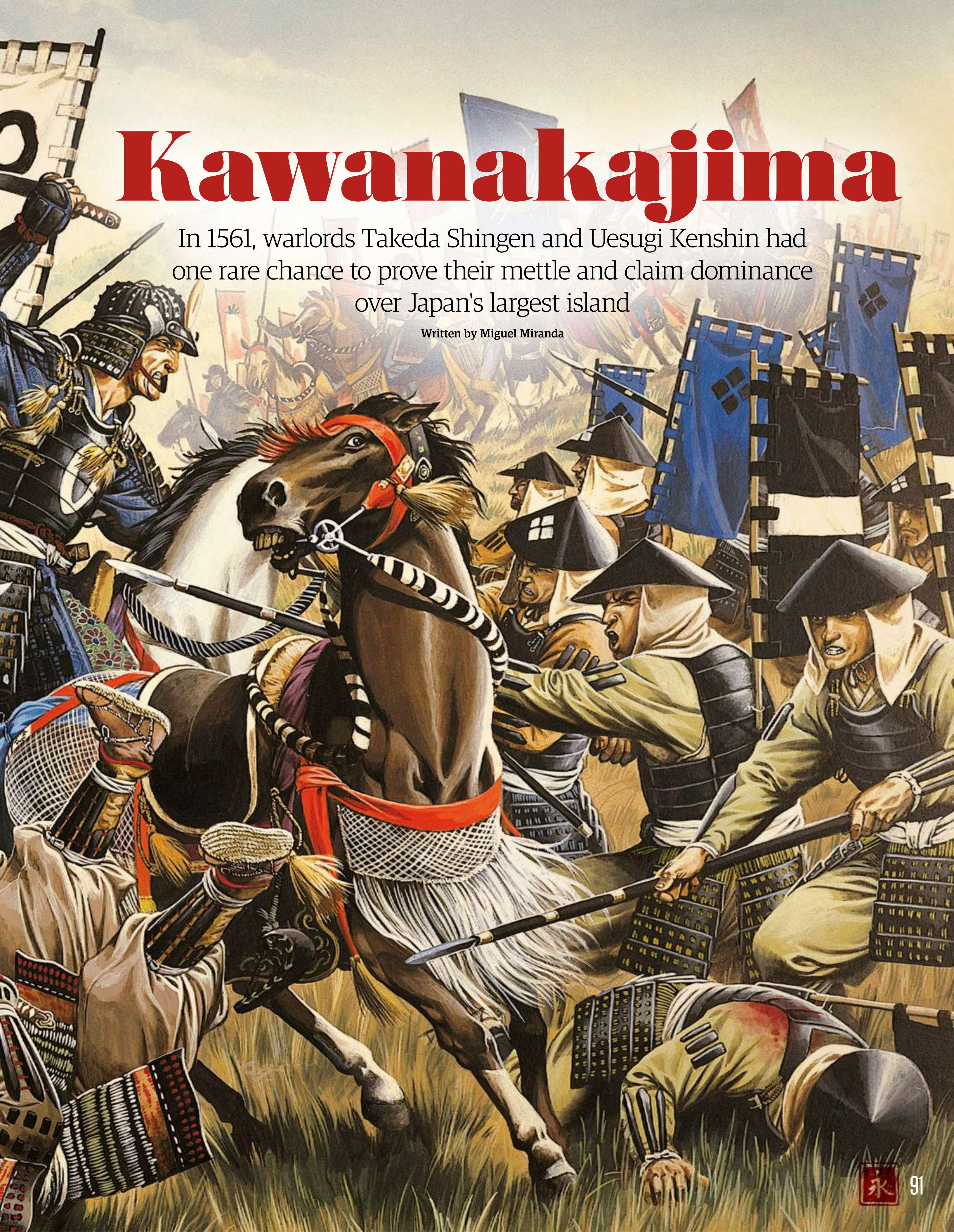
TOTAL FORCES: 20,000

VS

Uesugi clan

LEADER: Uesugi Kenshin, Lord of Echigo province

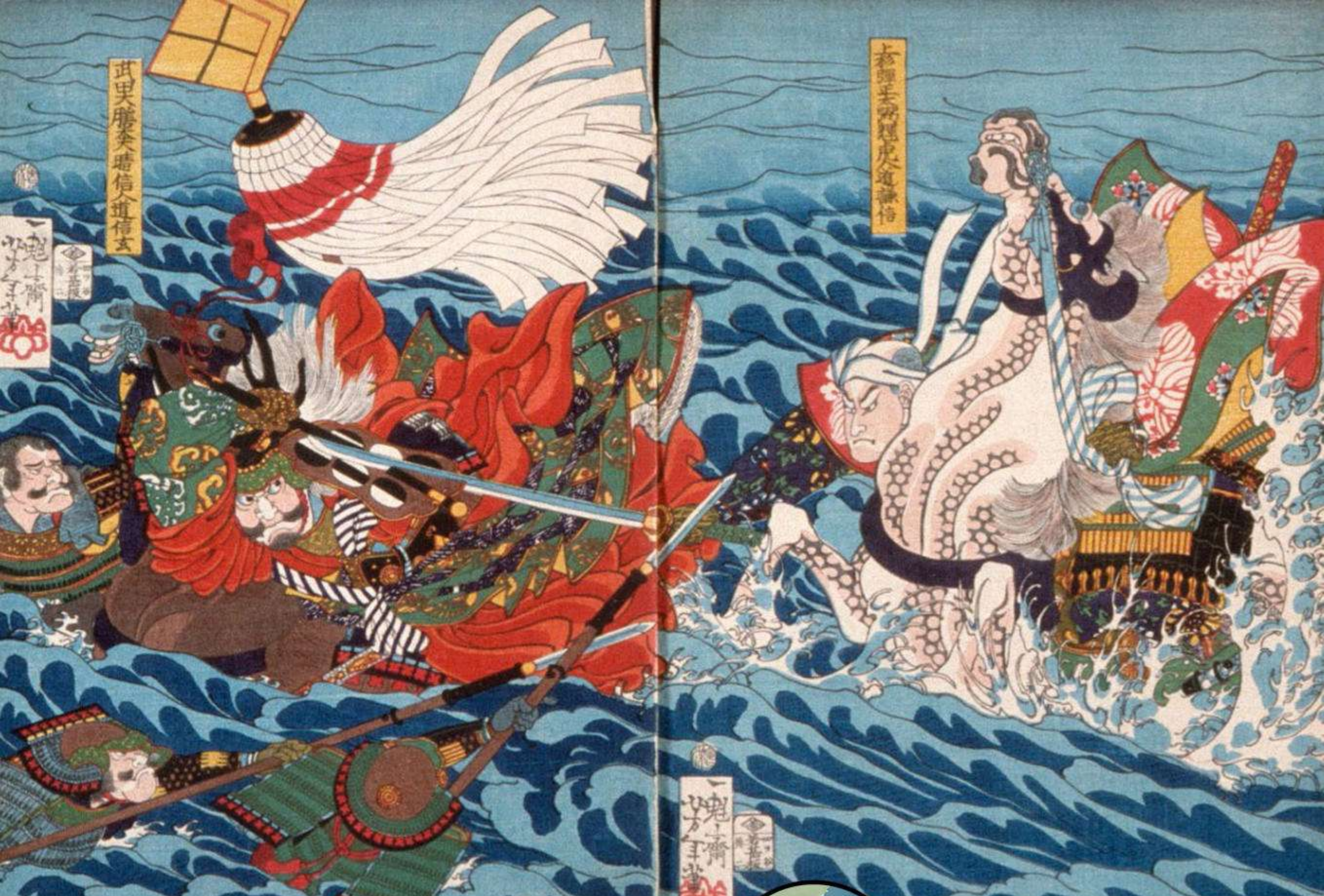
TOTAL FORCES: 18,000



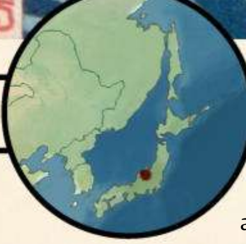
Kawanakajima

In 1561, warlords Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin had one rare chance to prove their mettle and claim dominance over Japan's largest island

Written by Miguel Miranda



THE KAWANAKAJIMA PLAIN IN SHINANO 16-17 OCTOBER 1561

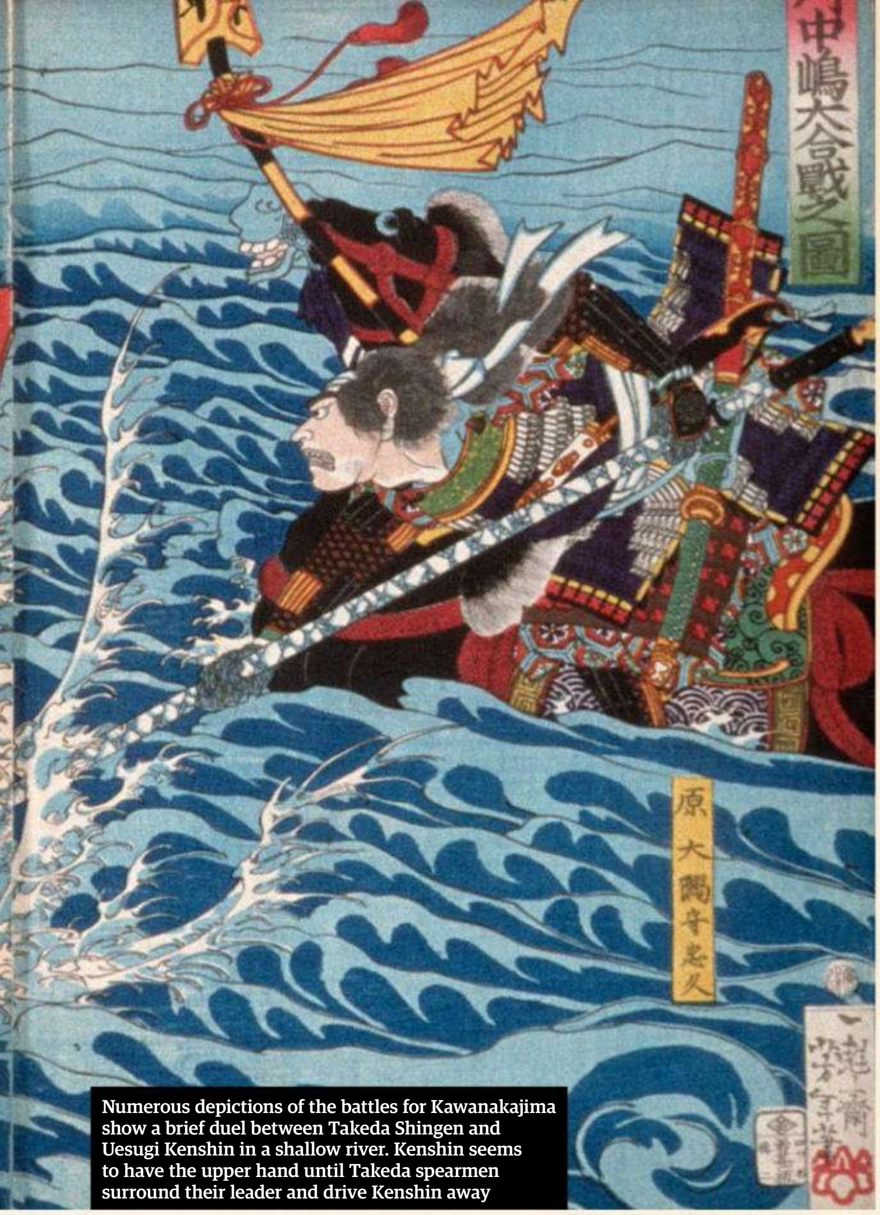


It was the height of the Sengoku Jidai (1467 CE-1603 CE), the terrible age when Japan's imperial system nearly collapsed among feuding warlords. As powerful samurai families vied for supremacy, either by supplanting their betters or conquering enemy domains, one particular rivalry echoed through the centuries to be hailed as an indelible part of Japan's national heritage. At the time of the Sengoku, two great houses, one led by a relentless military strategist and the other by a pious warrior, sought to expand their territory along the western edge of the Kanto Plain on the main island of Honshu. The struggle would drag on for 11 years.

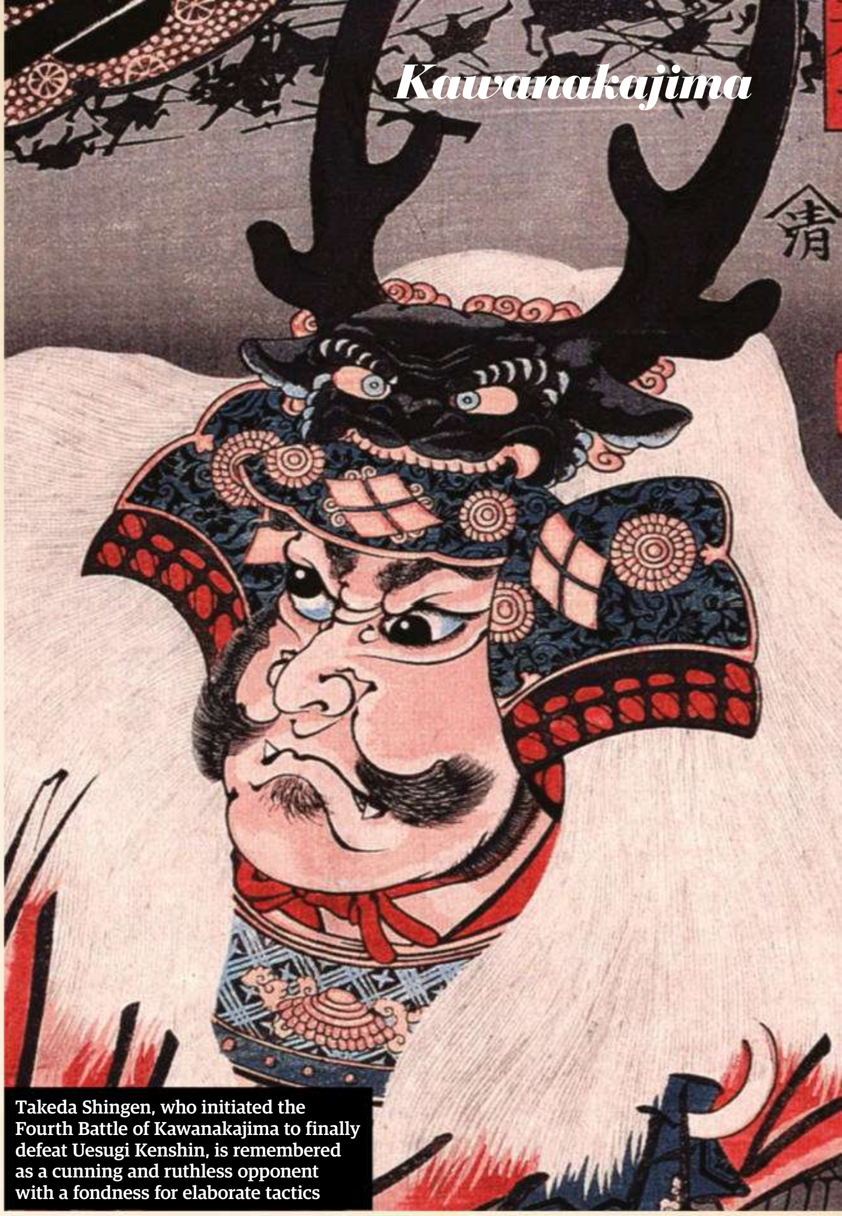
In the province of Shinano there was an empty plain called Kawanakajima where the Sai and Chikuma rivers met. It was over this terrain that the armies belonging to Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin faced each other on numerous occasions, but they never committed the full might of their samurai on a decisive battle. The reason for their enmity was direct control of Shinano; the Takeda clan wanted it added to their domain while the Uesugi deemed it a useful buffer to protect their own province, Echigo. In 1555, the two armies even camped on opposite ends of Kawanakajima waiting several months for the perfect opportunity to conclude a siege. Despite the fact that the Takeda were on the defensive and had the advantage of possessing firearms, no decisive chance came and the armies withdrew at the onset of winter. Years passed, and in September 1861 Uesugi Kenshin was confident enough to once again mobilise his samurai and march from his fortress by the sea, Kasugayama. Echigo had prospered under his rule and he was well-regarded for his courage and loyalty. Born under the name Nagao Kagetora into a family of samurai retainers, the future Daimyo was made an honorary member of the Uesugi clan and adopted the name 'Kenshin' upon taking a Buddhist monk's holy vows. Unlike many other warlords in the Sengoku era, he had no ambitions to vie for Kyoto, the Imperial capital and seat of the Ashikaga Shogunate that had perished decades before. Instead, the best years of his life were spent thwarting his nemesis, Takeda Shingen.

Kenchin's older rival was a formidable adversary who aspired to conquer a sizeable domain, surpassing that which he inherited from his kinsmen, whom he had imprisoned and usurped to secure his own leadership over the landlocked province of Kai. Barely 15 years old during his first battle, by the age of 40 Takeda Haronobu's hard-earned experience and temperament made him feared throughout Japan. Like Kenshin, he chose to rebrand his public persona with the Buddhist appellation 'Shingen' to embellish his stature as a local ruler. Although an unrelenting taskmaster to his own samurai, Shingen cultivated a reputation for fairness when dealing with his subjects. But since he was never content with just the province of Kai, Shingen thought it paramount to seize a larger swathe of land in the west nearer the sea. This meant subduing the province of Shinano and the idyllic Kawanakajima plain with it, since it could be used as a viable route for commercial and logistical traffic.

Despite his successful attacks on Shinano that drove its rulers to exile, Takeda Shingen had little control over Kawanakajima and its mountains. For the sake of expedience, he maintained a fortress with a commanding view over the Chikuma river. This stronghold, called Eizo, was a modest affair by the standards of the time but it could support several thousand samurai and had ramparts strong enough for withstanding a siege. Unknown to Takeda Shingen, his arch nemesis Uesugi Kenshin was already on the march and Eizo's token garrison was


中嶋大合戰之圖
原大隅守忠久

Numerous depictions of the battles for Kawanakajima show a brief duel between Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin in a shallow river. Kenshin seems to have the upper hand until Takeda spearmen surround their leader and drive Kenshin away



Takeda Shingen, who initiated the Fourth Battle of Kawanakajima to finally defeat Uesugi Kenshin, is remembered as a cunning and ruthless opponent with a fondness for elaborate tactics

insufficient to repel a determined push from the other side of the Chikuma river. In the beginning of October a Takeda army, 20,000 strong, marched to the likeliest site for a decisive clash – Kawanakajima. A nominal alliance with the Hojo clan from the province of Odawara to the north, who were also feuding with the Uesugi in Echigo, provided a good enough casus belli.

By 15 October both armies were in close enough proximity for valuable intelligence to be gathered by each side. Takeda Shingen even observed the march of the Uesugi from his side of the Chikuma river. Once secure in the Eizo fortress Shingen was informed by his trusted military strategist Yamamoto Kansuke that the Uesugi army was encamped in the Saijoyama heights to the south east. This was clear proof of Uesugi Kenshin's own intelligence. Holding elevated ground surrounded by forest, his army was almost impervious from attack. But the strategist Kansuke convinced his master that a narrow pass could be exploited for a raid on the Uesugi camp. Give him the right men, the Takeda strategist explained, and he would drive the Uesugi down to Kawanakajima.

Takeda Shingen recognised the tactics at play as described by his strategist. It was like a hunt, where the beasts are driven from their woodland hideouts to flee. As they rush over open ground in a brute panic, armed men blocking their path are at the ready for the ensuing slaughter. The Uesugi should meet the same fate. Once in disarray as they escaped the Saijoyama heights, the fastest way to the safety of their lands was over the rivers. Takeda Shingen applauded his strategist and decided to lay the trap himself. From Eizo he would march the bulk of his samurai to the Chikuma river's western bank awaiting the Uesugi rout. Yamamoto Kansuke, on the other hand, assigned 12,000 samurai to a trusted general, Kosaka Masonobu, aiming to overrun the Uesugi camp in a surprise attack.

> "Takeda Haronobu's experience and temperament made him feared throughout Japan"

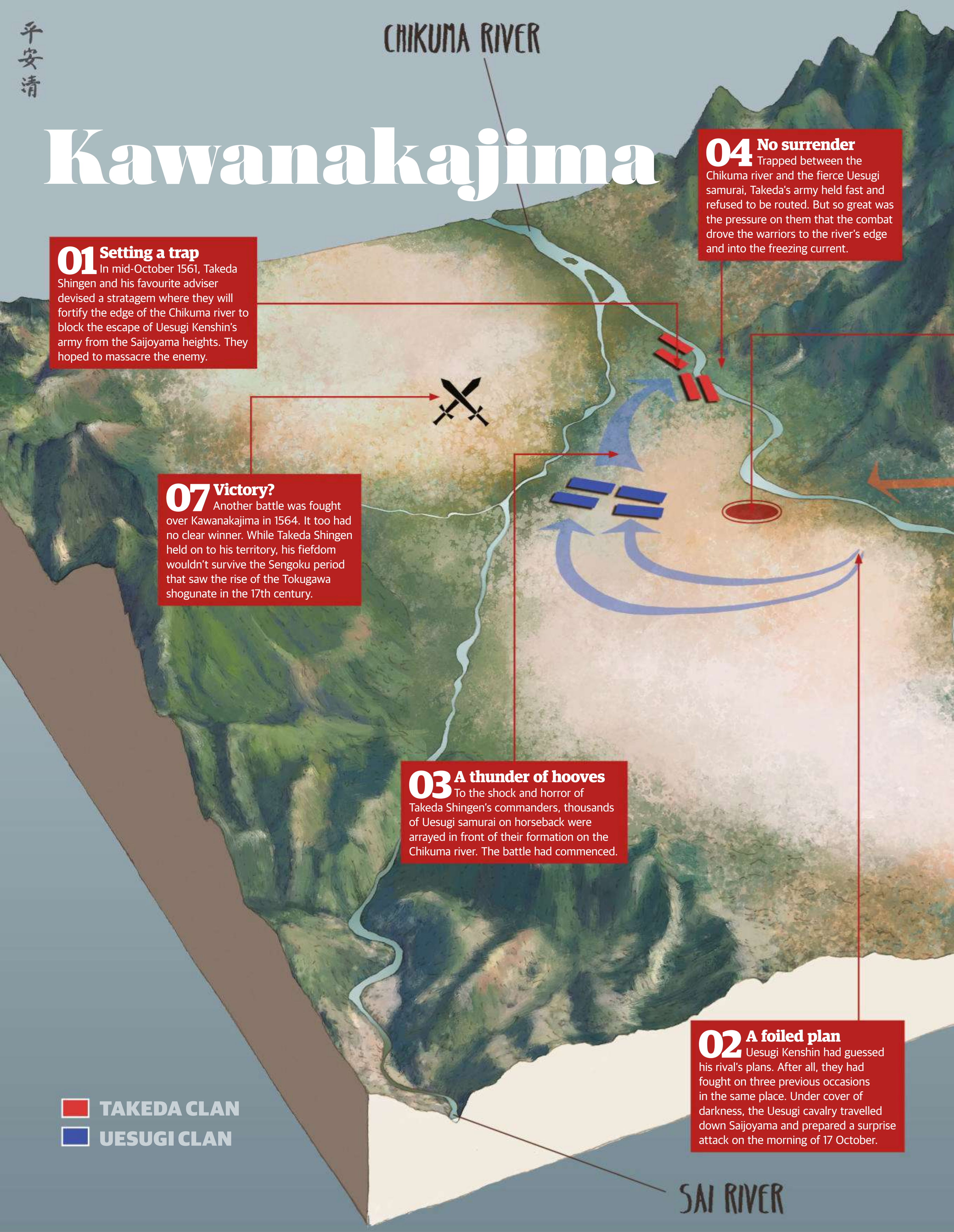
TURNING THE TABLES

Unknown to the occupants of the Eizo fortress their strategy was compromised before it even began. The daimyo (minor nobles under the shogun) and upstarts who bickered throughout Japan spent fortunes on their samurais' equipment – the Sengoku era saw the adoption of locally made Tanegashima muskets and other firearms – but placed greater value on critical intelligence. After all, outsmarting one's enemies could produce a greater effect than a mere battle over open ground. So on the same night the Takeda army set out from Eizo fortress, Uesugi Kenshin led his army down from Saijoyama.

How exactly Kenshin guessed his rival's plans has never been discovered. Perhaps a spy within Takeda Singen's inner circle had relayed his latest findings to the Uesugis. Yet conclusive evidence of this betrayal is non-existent. It could have been a combination of decisiveness and wits for Kenshin. Indeed the discipline of his army was such that an evacuation involving 18,000 samurai went unnoticed. Before daybreak the Uesugi army had traveled down Saijoyama and crossed the Chikuma river. Prudence dictated that the army's rear must be guarded, so Kenshin left 1,000 cavalrymen at a landmark called Amakasu.

Meanwhile, in the early morning of 17 October, an excited Takeda Shingen had arranged his 8,000 strong blocking force on the Kawanakajima plain ready to smash the fleeing Uesugi once Masonobu effected their retreat from the

Kawanakajima



01 Setting a trap

In mid-October 1561, Takeda Shingen and his favourite adviser devised a stratagem where they will fortify the edge of the Chikuma river to block the escape of Uesugi Kenshin's army from the Saijoyama heights. They hoped to massacre the enemy.

02 A foiled plan

Uesugi Kenshin had guessed his rival's plans. After all, they had fought on three previous occasions in the same place. Under cover of darkness, the Uesugi cavalry travelled down Saijoyama and prepared a surprise attack on the morning of 17 October.

03 A thunder of hooves

To the shock and horror of Takeda Shingen's commanders, thousands of Uesugi samurai on horseback were arrayed in front of their formation on the Chikuma river. The battle had commenced.

04 No surrender

Trapped between the Chikuma river and the fierce Uesugi samurai, Takeda's army held fast and refused to be routed. But so great was the pressure on them that the combat drove the warriors to the river's edge and into the freezing current.

07 Victory?

Another battle was fought over Kawanakajima in 1564. It too had no clear winner. While Takeda Shingen held on to his territory, his fiefdom wouldn't survive the Sengoku period that saw the rise of the Tokugawa shogunate in the 17th century.

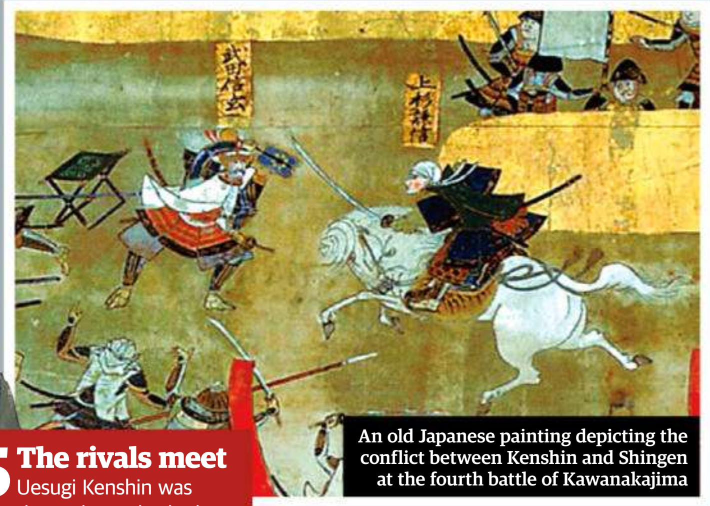
🟥 TAKEDA CLAN

🟦 UESUGI CLAN

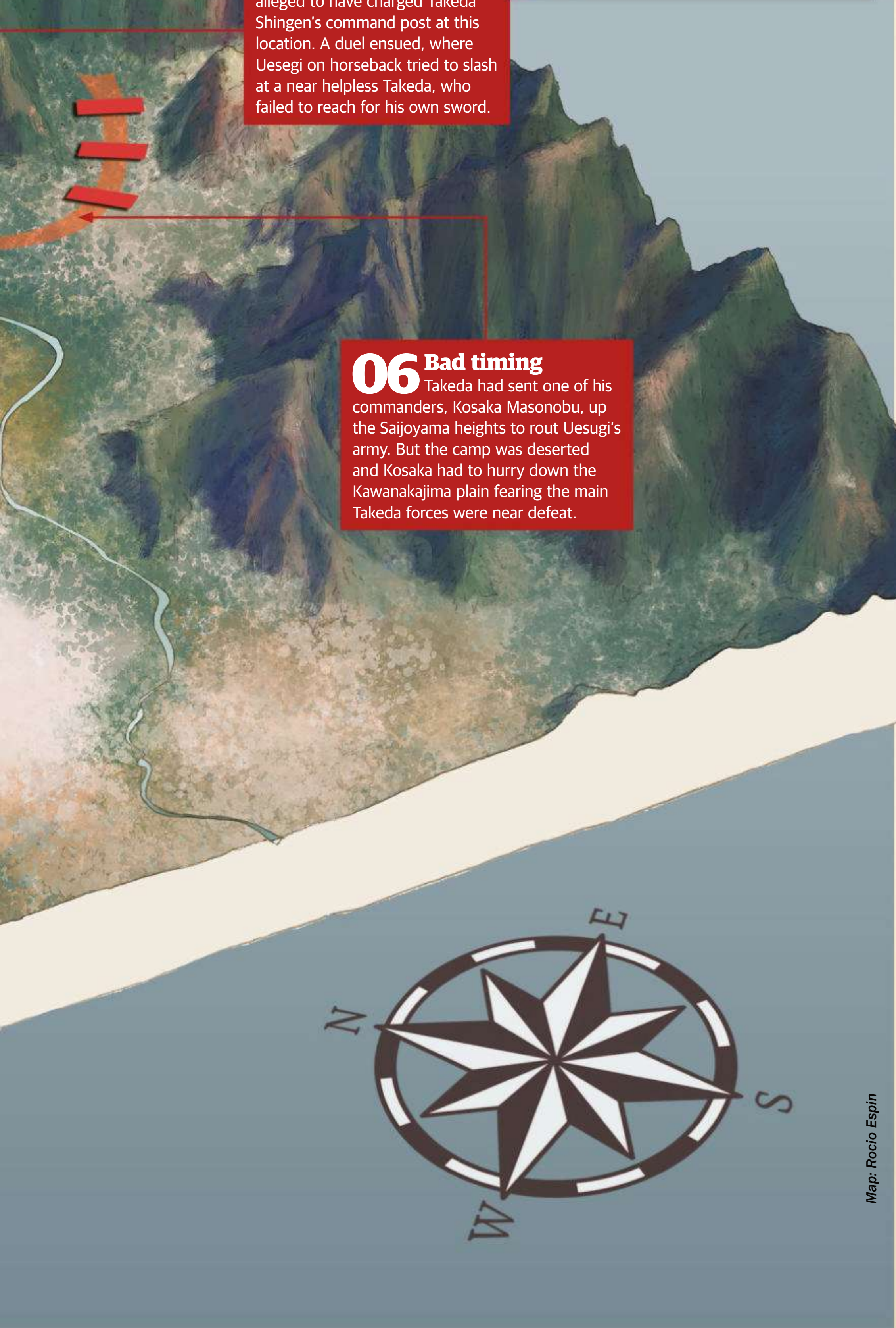
Saijoyama heights. The leader of the Takeda was so confident of victory that he remained seated in the small enclosure that served as his command post while deferential subordinates reported to him. An impenetrable fog had crept down from the nearby mountains and covered the battlefield in haze as the Takeda army waited in absolute silence. Soon, ever so slowly, the fog lifted and a worrisome noise reached the arrayed samurai. It was the ominous rumble of approaching cavalry and once the banners held aloft by the horsemen could be seen it became apparent to the Takeda their day would not be easy. The Uesugi were rushing toward them, lances and bows at the ready, and Masonobu's own pursuit was nowhere to be seen.

What became the Fourth Battle of Kawanakajima spanned a single dreadful day. Separated from more than half their number, the Takeda samurai put up a valiant defence with their swords and spears. The Uesugi exerted themselves too, albeit in successive charges at their stubborn opponents. This tactic meant the Uesugi cavalry struck the immobile Takeda until their arrows and stamina were depleted, compelling a sudden withdrawal. Rather than allow for a moment's reprieve, another wave of cavalry descended on the Takeda, who refused to scatter in their leader's presence.

The singular moment of the battle involved Takeda Shingen's near death at the hands of Uesugi Kenshin, who had stormed his enemy's command post. Still astride his mount, Kenshin led a small retinue of cavalry and rushed the position. Rather than face a wall of loyal Takeda samurai, the enclosure was almost deserted except for Shingen himself, who was startled by Kenshin's sudden appearance. Not missing the opportunity, Kenshin slashed at the Takeda daimyo, hoping to deliver a mortal blow. But Shingen, attired in full body armour complete with ornamental horns over his brow, blocked Kenshin's sword with his sturdy two-sided fan, which functioned more like a commander's baton. Before Kinshen could trample on the straining



An old Japanese painting depicting the conflict between Kenshin and Shingen at the fourth battle of Kawanakajima

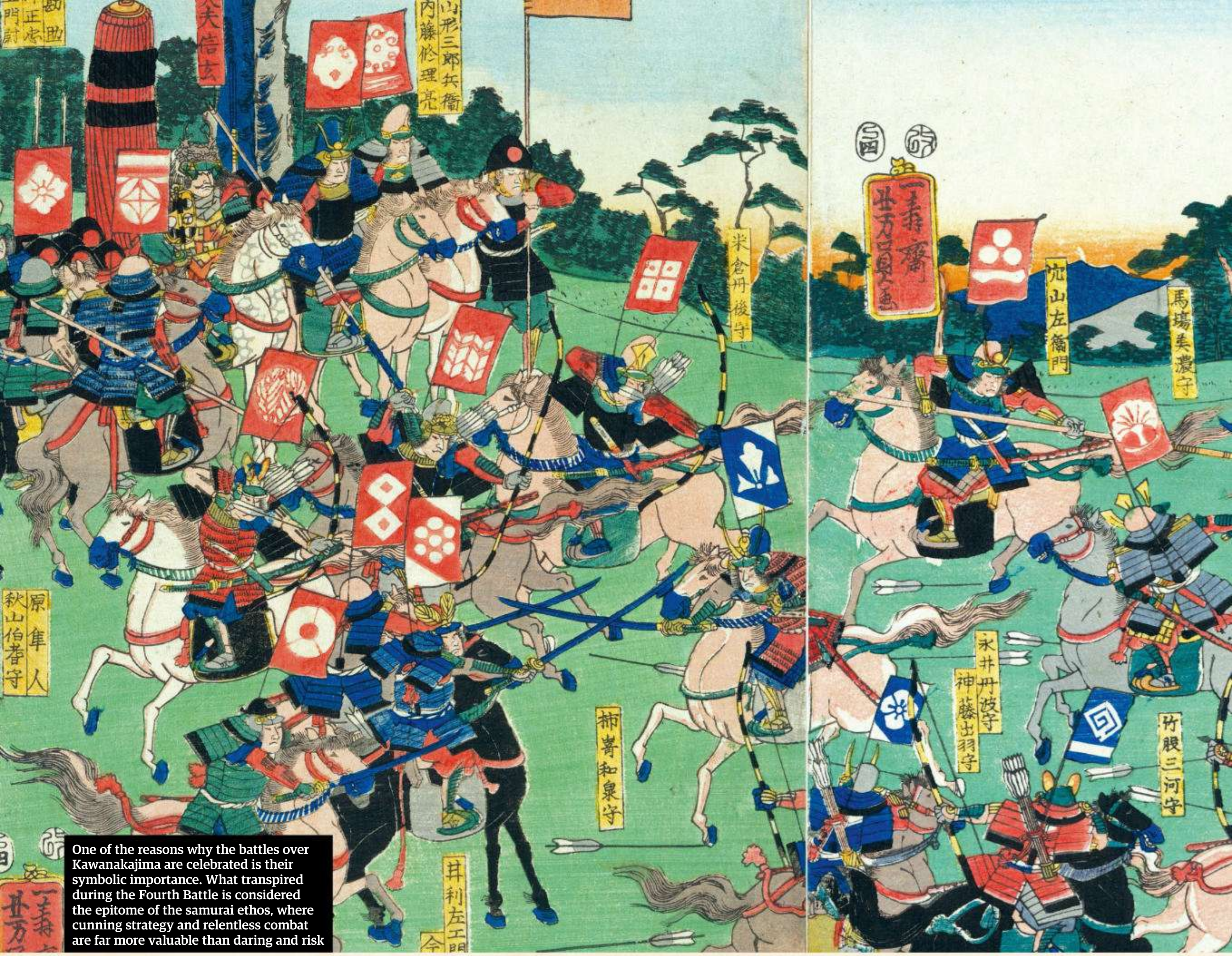


05 The rivals meet Uesugi Kenshin was alleged to have charged Takeda Shingen's command post at this location. A duel ensued, where Uesegi on horseback tried to slash at a near helpless Takeda, who failed to reach for his own sword.

06 Bad timing Takeda had sent one of his commanders, Kosaka Masonobu, up the Saijoyama heights to rout Uesugi's army. But the camp was deserted and Kosaka had to hurry down the Kawanakajima plain fearing the main Takeda forces were near defeat.

Map: Rocio Espin

> "Shingen, attired in full body armour complete with ornamental horns, blocked Kenshin's sword with his two-sided fan"


山形三郎兵衛
内藤修理亮
米倉丹後守
穴山左衛門
馬場美濃守
原隼人
秋山伯耆守

One of the reasons why the battles over Kawanakajima are celebrated is their symbolic importance. What transpired during the Fourth Battle is considered the epitome of the samurai ethos, where cunning strategy and relentless combat are far more valuable than daring and risk

Shingen or swing his sword again to decapitate the Takeda daimyo, his horse was wounded by an attacking spearman.

Dramatic reproductions of the Fourth Battle later contrived a separate episode involving the Takeda and Uesugi leaders. At an unspecified moment, Shingen was able to mount his horse and lead a counter-attack on the Uesugi, but was chased away by a relentless Kenshin whose head was wrapped in a white towel. This was atypical for mounted warriors, except that Kenshin was a devout Buddhist who donned religious garb even in combat. Wading into the Chikuma river, the two warlords slashed at each other with their swords. But the youthful Kenshin, who was just 31 years old to Shingen's 40, overpowered his rival and struck the Takeda daimyo's shoulder. Before the injured Shingen collapsed into the rushing currents beneath him, a fearsome group of Takeda samurai surrounded Kenshin and drove him away.

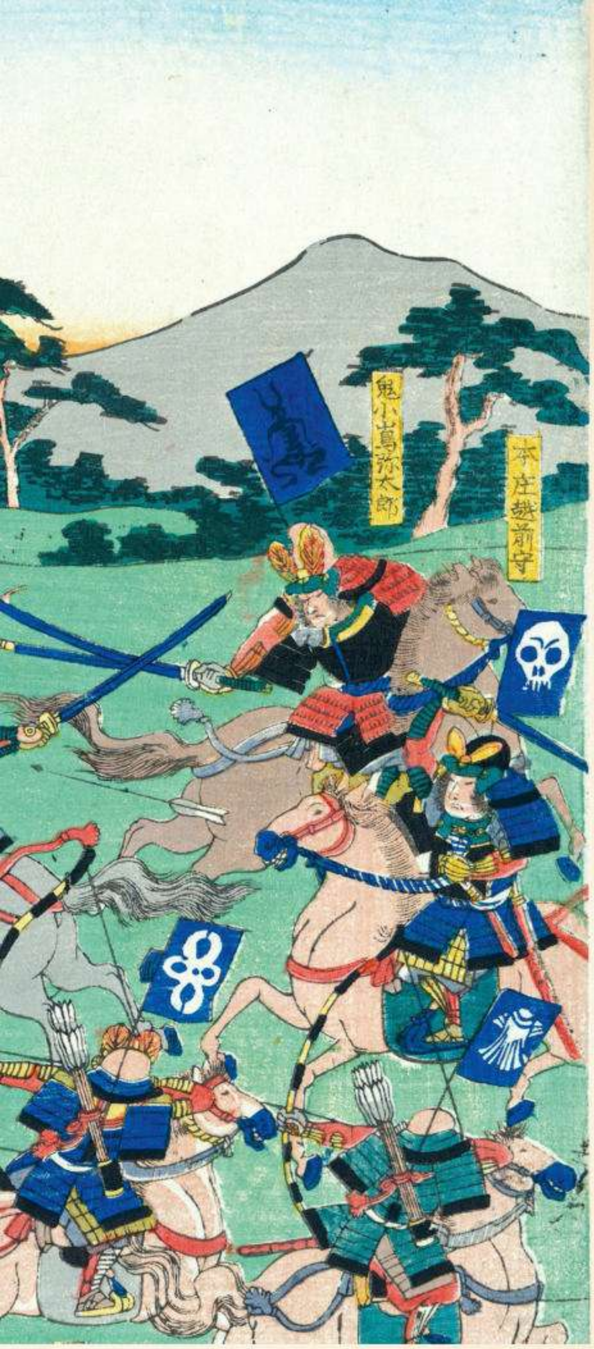
What almost ended the battle was the shambolic arrival of the 12,000 strong contingent led by Yosaka Masonobu, who were earlier tasked with attacking the Uesugi camped at Saijoyama. Upon discovering the position vacant, a worried Mosonobu led his samurai down the same mountain trail to reach the Kawanakajima plain below. Their momentum was almost halted by a strong detachment of 1,000 Uesugi samurai guarding a crossing on the Chikuma river. Sheer force of numbers allowed the Takeda to prevail and they soon caught up with the Uesugi. It seemed as if an encirclement was underway, yet before noon the tireless Kenshin had reorganised his formations and effected a clean withdrawal.

NOTHING RESOLVED

Distraught at his part in the failed Takeda plan, Yamamoto Kansuke led a final suicidal charge against the Uesugi in a bid to protect his master. Shingen's own brother Nobushige was killed in the ensuing combat when the Uesugi cavalry fell upon the Takeda by the river. Many favoured generals and veterans were among the dead that littered the plain. No proper account of casualties on either side has ever been tallied in Japanese historical records. Neither did the Takeda and Uesugi leaders bother to write memoirs that detailed their own memories of the Kawanakajima campaigns. But the intensity of the showdown near the Chikuma river may have killed several thousand samurai. Such casualties were well above the usual battlefield losses during the Sengoku period, when daimyos preferred small clashes over great set piece engagements.

> "It seemed as if an encirclement was underway, yet before noon Kenshin had reorganised and effected a clean withdrawal"

Neither the exhausted Takedas nor the battered Uesugis attained a clear victory on the fateful day. Still brooding over the battle's outcome, Takeda Shingen returned to his province after collecting the severed heads of Uesugi samurai as trophies. But Uesugi Kenshin survived and control over the Kawanakajima plain



An example of Japanese samurai armour

was undecided. Two years passed before another clash occurred near the site of the fourth battle, but the actions that transpired then ultimately proved to be insignificant.

Fate rendered cruel judgment on the two warlords. For Takeda Shingen, no conquest was too far-fetched and he perished during a siege of a castle held by Oda Nobunaga, then the most powerful warlord in Japan. The Takedas's power finally ebbed after the disastrous Battle of Nagashino in 1575 when Shingen's son and heir led the clan's legions against their familiar enemy, Nobunaga, and lost countless samurai to musket fire arrayed behind palisades.

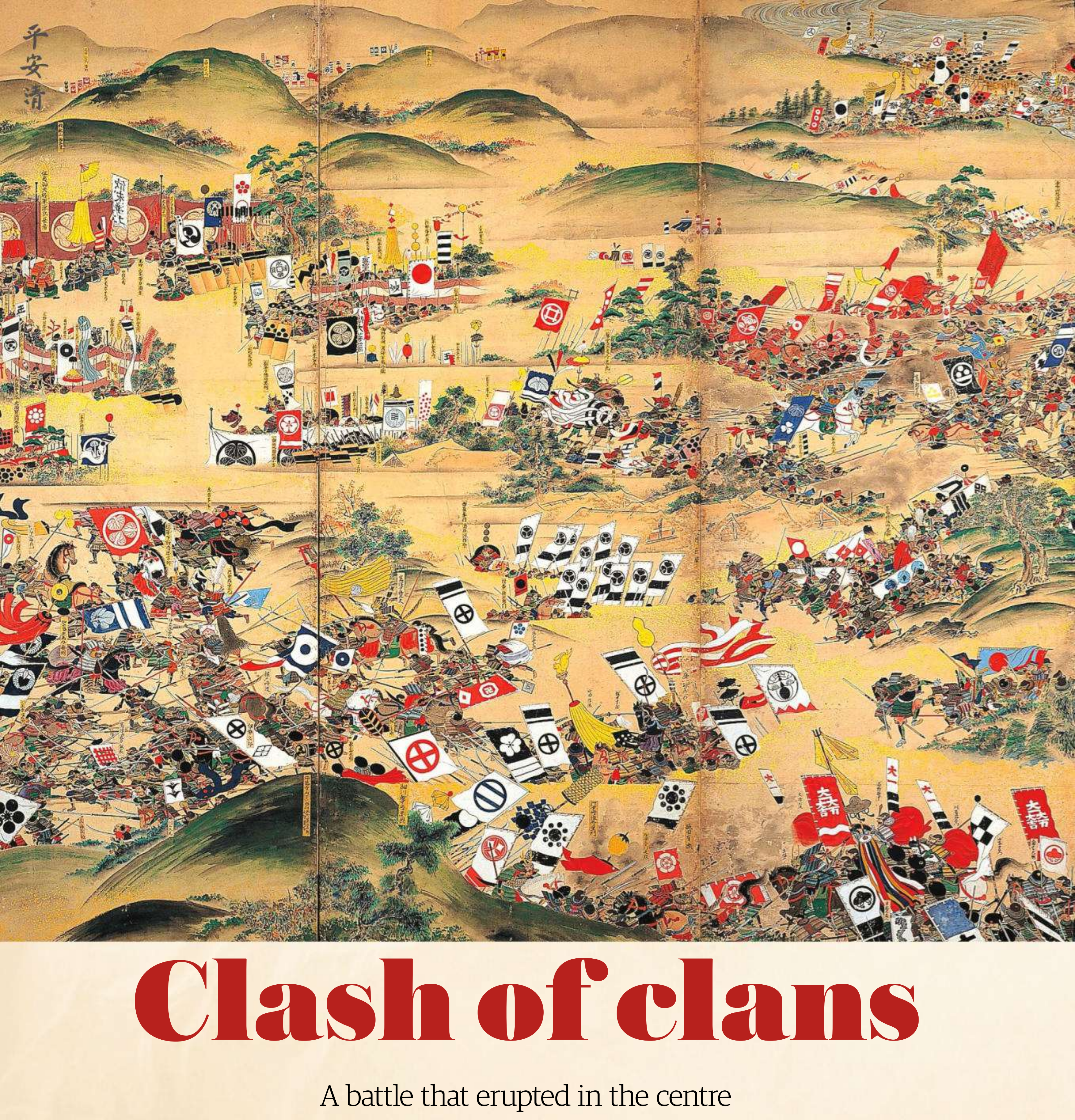
However, the Uesugi fared worse. Kenshin died in suspicious circumstances at the age of 49. One version of his demise recounts how a ninja waited in a lavatory for his target to arrive. When the chance presented itself, a mortal wound was dealt to the Uesugi leader – it's debatable whether the killing blow was a knife to Kenshin's rectum or some other sensitive part of his anatomy.

The legacy of the struggle for Kawanakajima, including the celebrated Fourth Battle where the Takeda and Uesugi armies fought to exhaustion, is ambiguous at best. While it ranks among the larger engagements during the Sengoku period, it had little impact on the course of Japan's history. The rise of the warlord Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1603 marked the definitive end of the Sengoku period as another Shogunate was established, achieving for that which Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi strived. The ensuing Edo period, its name taken from the Tokugawa capital, lasted three centuries and saw a flourishing of the arts. Depictions of the Fourth Battle of Kawanakajima date to the 19th century when woodblock printing encompassed different genres, including historical topics. It was in this later period when the drama and symbolism around the rivalry between the Takeda and Uesugi was popularised.

A familiar scene that has been interpreted for generations is the personal duel between a shocked Takeda Shingen and a furious Uesugi Kenshin. Shingen using his fan to block Kenshin's sword blows lends a touch of humour and poignancy in creative retelling yet it's curious how primary accounts that should describe the incident as it happened have never surfaced. Even if it had little impact on Japan's history, the Fourth Battle of Kawanakajima is useful for the lessons it imparts. Foremost is the value of sound intelligence for leaders who must decide quickly. Whatever methods and resources were at his disposal, Uesugi Kenshin turned a disadvantageous situation around and surprised his enemy by leading his forces out of the Saijoyama heights. In the process he deceived one part of the Takeda army and launched a surprise attack on the his rival in the Kawanakajima plain. Another timeless insight is knowing when to be flexible in difficult circumstances. Takeda Shingen had been overconfident about his plan to entrap the Uesugi, but once his samurai were caught between the Chikuma river and the attacking enemy, adaptation meant survival. The Takeda samurai did manage to hold off the Uesugis long enough to partially encircle them. But Uesugi Kenshi was wise enough to not press on and ordered a withdrawal that saved the bulk of his army.

Whether as a cultural artefact or a masterclass in strategic thinking and prudent leadership, the Fourth Battle of Kawanakajima will be remembered for generations.

Images: Alamy, Rocilo Espin, Osprey

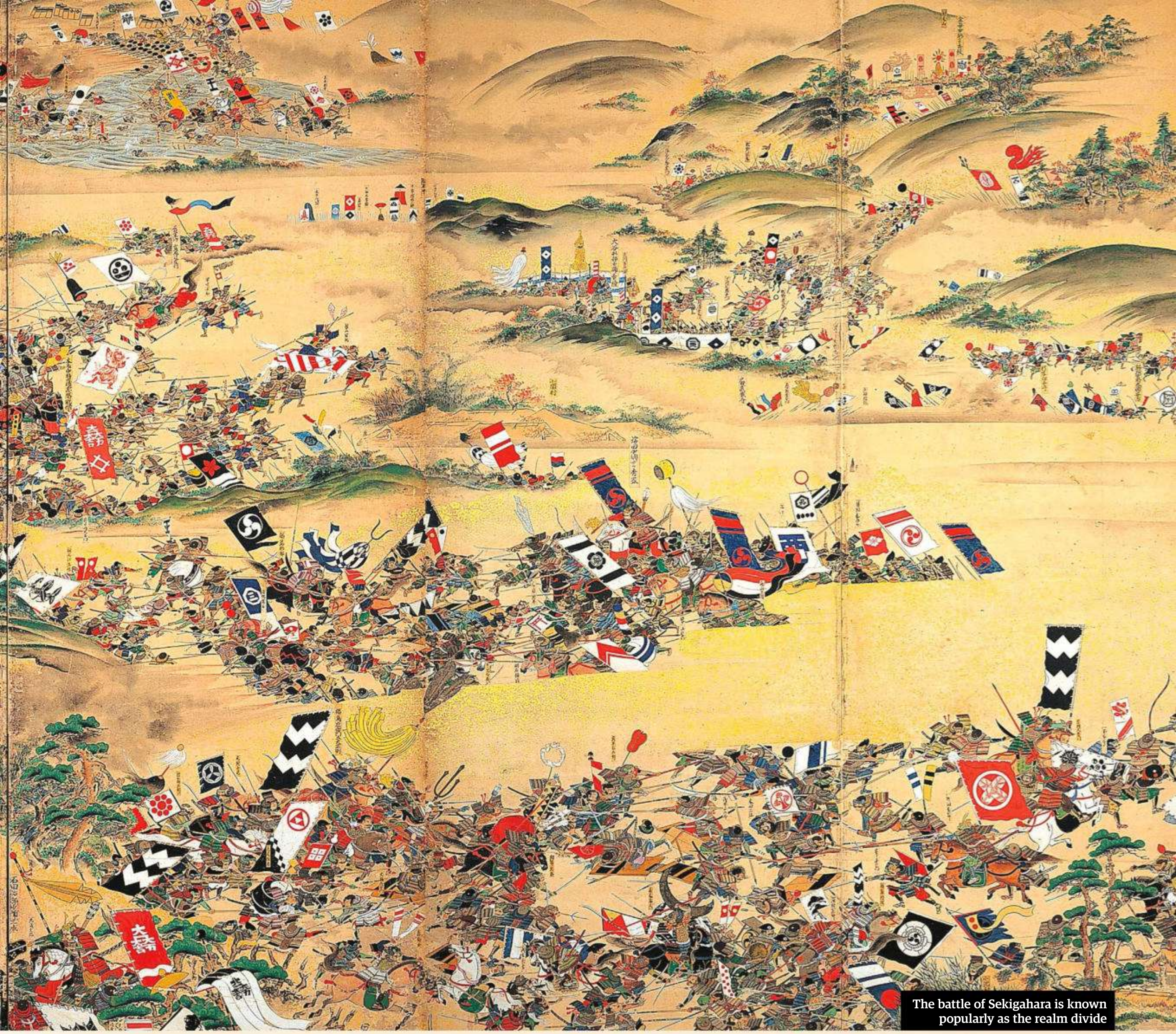


Clash of clans

A battle that erupted in the centre of Japan would decide the fate of the nation

Written by Frances White

By the end of the 16th century, Oda Nobunaga had changed Japan forever. The samurai warlord had conquered his way across the country, taking control of the fractured military fiefdoms one by one. Slowly but surely Nobunaga's bloody campaign led to the unification of a third of Japan, forming a mighty land far removed from the warring states that existed before. However, a swift and shocking end was put to this unification when his own samurai general, Akechi Mitsuhide betrayed him and the warlord was forced to commit ritual suicide, or seppuku. However, Mitsuhide would not rule for long. Nobunaga's loyal vassal,



The battle of Sekigahara is known popularly as the realm divide

SEKIGAHARA, JAPAN, 21 OCTOBER 1600

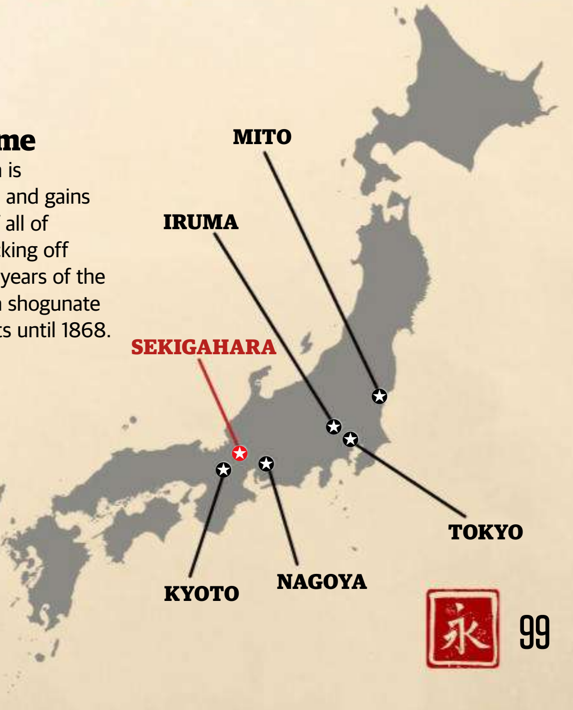
Who
Western clans loyal to Toyotomi Hideyori led by Ishida Mitsunari and Mori Terumoto, versus the eastern clans loyal to Tokugawa Ieyasu.

What
A conflict to establish the ruling dynasty of Japan, by granting the victorious clan and its lord strategic control of the approach to the capital of Kyoto.

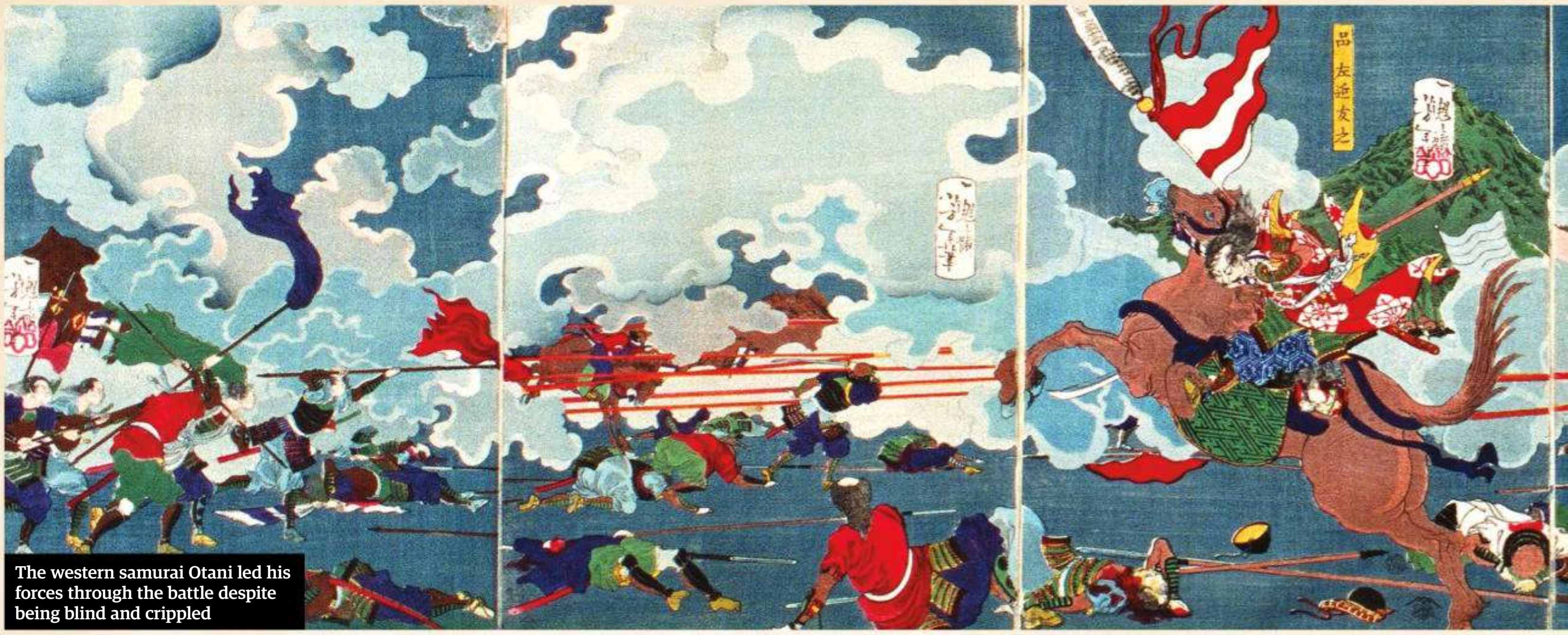
Where
Sekigahara, a town in the modern Fuwa district, known as the crossroads of the country as it's in the centre of Japan's main island, Honshu.

Why
The death of daimyo and "second great unifier" Toyotomi Hideyoshi created a power vacuum, and two factions moved forward to fill it.

Outcome
Tokugawa is victorious and gains control of all of Japan, kicking off over 250 years of the Tokugawa shogunate which lasts until 1868.



Toyotomi Hideyoshi, vowed to avenge his master and faced the usurper in battle – forcing him to flee just two hours after the fighting began at Yamazaki. Mitsuhide's reign as shogun had lasted only 13 days. The man who had defeated him, Toyotomi, came from only humble beginnings. Not the son of a samurai or a daimyo, (a feudal lord), he was peasant-born and was given no surname at birth. Nevertheless, Toyotomi was fiercely loyal to his master and continued the work



The western samurai Otani led his forces through the battle despite being blind and crippled

of unifying the warring states of the country. He steadily consolidated power until his death in 1598, leaving his clan to take control of the ever-growing and powerful Japanese nation.

Many didn't like the idea of being ruled by a previously peasant clan, and Toyotomi's failed invasions of Korea also cast doubts over its power. With the ruling clan's right to reign in doubt, a huge power vacuum formed in the Japanese government, and one man in particular was very keen to fill it.

Tokugawa Ieyasu, unlike Toyotomi, had a privileged background and was born to rule. His father had been a daimyo and his mother the daughter of a samurai lord – noble blood pulsed through his veins. He had been surrounded by war and death since the day he was born and he believed with every fibre of his being that he was the right person to rule the united land. He had caused unrest previously by pledging his allegiance to Oda Nobukatsu, the heir of Oda Nobunaga opposed to Toyotomi, and he decided to rise up against the same family once more. For two years he plotted, schemed and persuaded various daimyo to side with him against the Toyotomi clan. With perfect timing for Tokugawa, the oldest and most respected of the Toyotomi regents died, so the ambitious lord made his move. He took over Osaka castle, the residence of the young Hideyori, son of Toyotomi, in a brutal and obvious snatch for power.

Ishida Mitsunari stood as the main opposition to Tokugawa's aggression. This powerful daimyo had a long history with Toyotomi, as well as fighting side by side with the ruler, he was also a top administrator of the regime. A man of rigid character with a calculating brain, Mitsunari had trouble maintaining relationships with men whose power he desperately needed.

He immediately recognised Tokugawa as a threat to the Toyotomi rule, so headed an unsuccessful plot to have him assassinated. While provincial regents built up their military forces amid flying accusations of betrayal, outraged condemnations of clans and families attacking one another, Tokugawa finally summoned together all his supporters into a powerful force. Mitsunari also took advantage of the chaos, bringing together all those loyal to the Toyotomi clan.

> " Wet, cold, tired and with damp gunpowder, Mitsunari and his men halted at the town of Sekigahara"

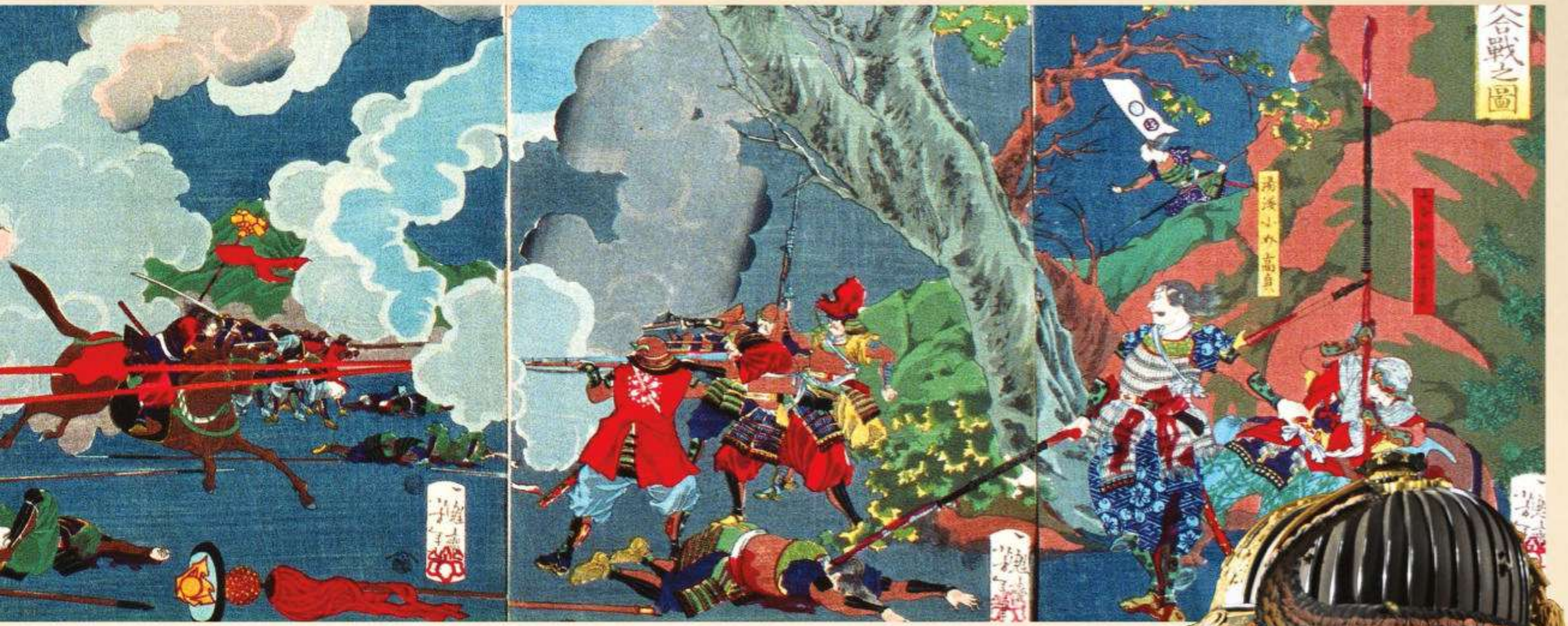
THE TWO ARMIES ASSEMBLE

Tokugawa wasn't the only one with powerful friends. While his rival was distracted hunting down a wayward clan that had taken up arms, Mitsunari gathered a group of powerful samurai and government figures, including Otani Yoshitsugu and Mori Terumoto. The force he brought together became the western army to counter Tokugawa's eastern army. Terumoto took the near-abandoned Osaka Castle as his base, but when Tokugawa learned of his enemy's movements he split his forces, sending several daimyo to engage the main western army while he marched towards Osaka.

Both armies were now marching towards Gifu castle, where the roads to Osaka converged. Mitsunari intended to take the castle and use it as a staging area for his planned takeover of Kyoto. However, his enemy got there first, and the general was forced to retreat south against a violent storm.

Wet, cold, tired and with uselessly damp gunpowder, Mitsunari and his men halted at the town of Sekigahara, expecting the eastern army to attack at any time. He arranged his men in a defensive position with two streams either side of them. On 20 October, Tokugawa finally learned of the disposition of his enemy's troops after his advanced guard accidentally stumbled right upon the awaiting army in thick fog. Both sides panicked and withdrew before any action was

The arquebuses snuck into the battle by the eastern forces proved to be pivotal to their success



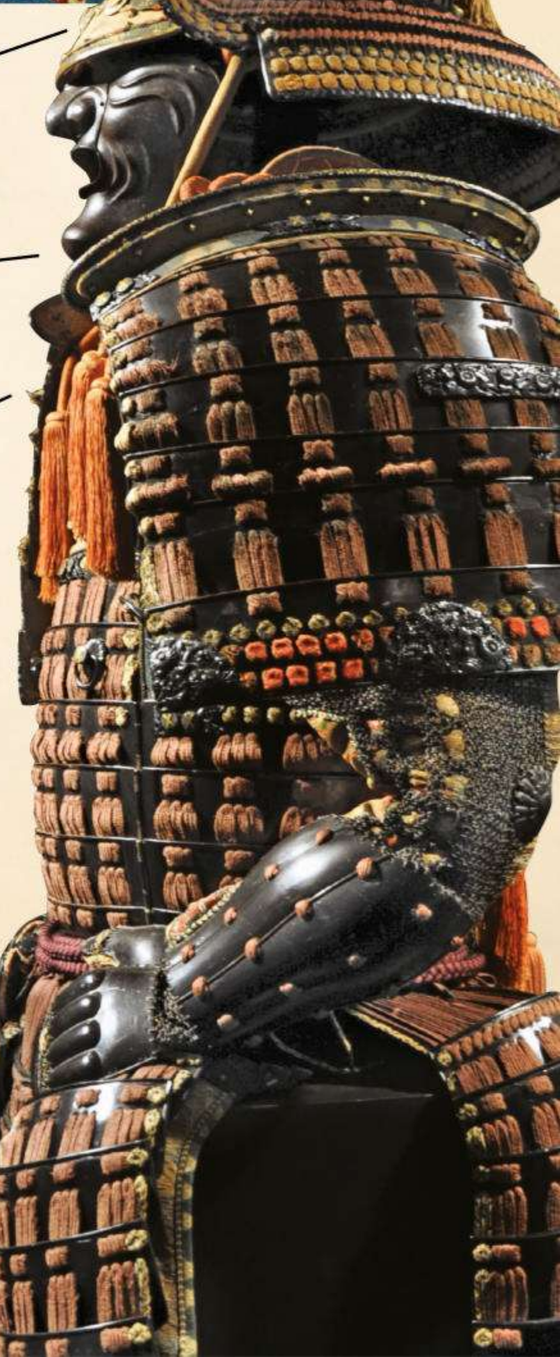
taken, but pitched battle between the two forces was now inevitable.

To many it seemed that Tokugawa's army was completely outmatched. Mitsunari's western army numbered some 120,000 men, over 40,000 more than the eastern opposition. Mitsunari also held all the tactical advantages: he had men positioned high on the hills around the terrain, and his own army was placed between two rivers. But Tokugawa was no fool, and had managed to sneak in a supply of arquebuses – powerful muzzle-loading firearms that could easily turn the tide of battle against a sword-equipped foe. Perhaps most importantly, his scheming has taken root among the ranks of the western army, as he had promised swaths of land to the daimyo that would change sides during the battle. First he needed to demonstrate that his was the winning cause.

THE EASTERN ARMY ATTACKS

As soon as the heavy mist masking the field lifted, Tokugawa's vanguard, led by Fukushima Masanori, charged north, following the Fuji river. They crashed into the western army's defensive line positioned in the right-centre, where persistent rain had softened the ground into a muddy, sludgy mess. The organised lines quickly descended into chaos and the fighting became brutal, with men desperately tearing into one another, but neither side gained an advantage in the sudden desperate madness of combat.

Tokugawa, witnessing Fukushima's attack failing to make any ground, commanded his right and his centre to charge the enemy's left, hoping that sheer numbers would overwhelm and Fukushima would finally be able to break through. The large number of samurai streaming across the field caught Mitsunari's attention, causing him to turn his as yet unscathed centre force. This simple command began to show the cracks in not only Mitsunari's army, but also his own leadership. Shimazu Yoshihiro, in control of the centre, flat out refused to ride to the aid of the right flank, and the powerful daimyo proclaimed he would only listen to respected commanders. Mitsunari's stubborn centre remained firmly in place, and he could only watch as Tokugawa's attack sliced through his men. With Mitsunari's centre refusing



Helmet
Known as a kabuto, this helmet is comprised of forged plates riveted together. The crescent moon helmet was famously worn by the well-known warrior Date Masamune.

Mask
Also known as a mempo, samurai would often wear a variety of face masks to help support the heavy helmet, while the fearsome designs played a vital psychological role.

Dou
Made from a series of steel plates linked together by leather thongs. This body armour would be covered with lacquer that would make it weatherproof.

OPPOSING FORCES

	Eastern Army	Western Army
LEADER(S)	Tokugawa Ieyasu	Ishida Mitsunari, Mori Terumoto
STRENGTH	Approx 88,890	Approx 81,890
GAME CHANGERS	Arquebus: an early muzzle-loaded matchlock firearm considered dishonorable by many samurai.	Strategic advantage and a greater number of troops stationed at key points.

to move, Masanori's attack finally gained ground, but this only served to put them in more danger. As the eastern force advanced along the Fuji river, Otani Yoshitsugu, one of the few powerful samurai who Mitsunari had somehow managed to convince to defect to his side, stood positioned across the river. His forces were able to pounce on the advancing eastern army, slowing down Fukushima's attack once more.

THE SPLINTERED WESTERN SHIELD

Also positioned across the Fuji river, on Mount Matsuo, Kobayakawa Hideaki began by fighting for the western alliance. However, Tokugawa had courted the general before the battle and Kobayakawa had secretly promised he would defect to fight with the eastern army when the time was right. With Yoshitsugu's surprise forces just past him, the time was ideal for Kobayakawa to act - but he hesitated. With Mitsunari sending frantic signals for Kobayakawa to aid Yoshitsugu, and Tokugawa aware that his entire cause could hang on whether Kobayakawa moved, the general was frozen with decision. Not a man known for patience, Tokugawa decided to take action. He commanded his men to fire their arquebuses at Kobayakawa's position, forcing him to make a choice. As the shots rained down on Mount Matsuo, Kobayakawa's force finally charged down the hill into the fray. Kobayakawa's soldiers ignored Masanori and directed their attack at the western leader, Yoshitsugu. Kobayakawa, although it had taken some persuasion, held firm on his promise and betrayed his western allies.

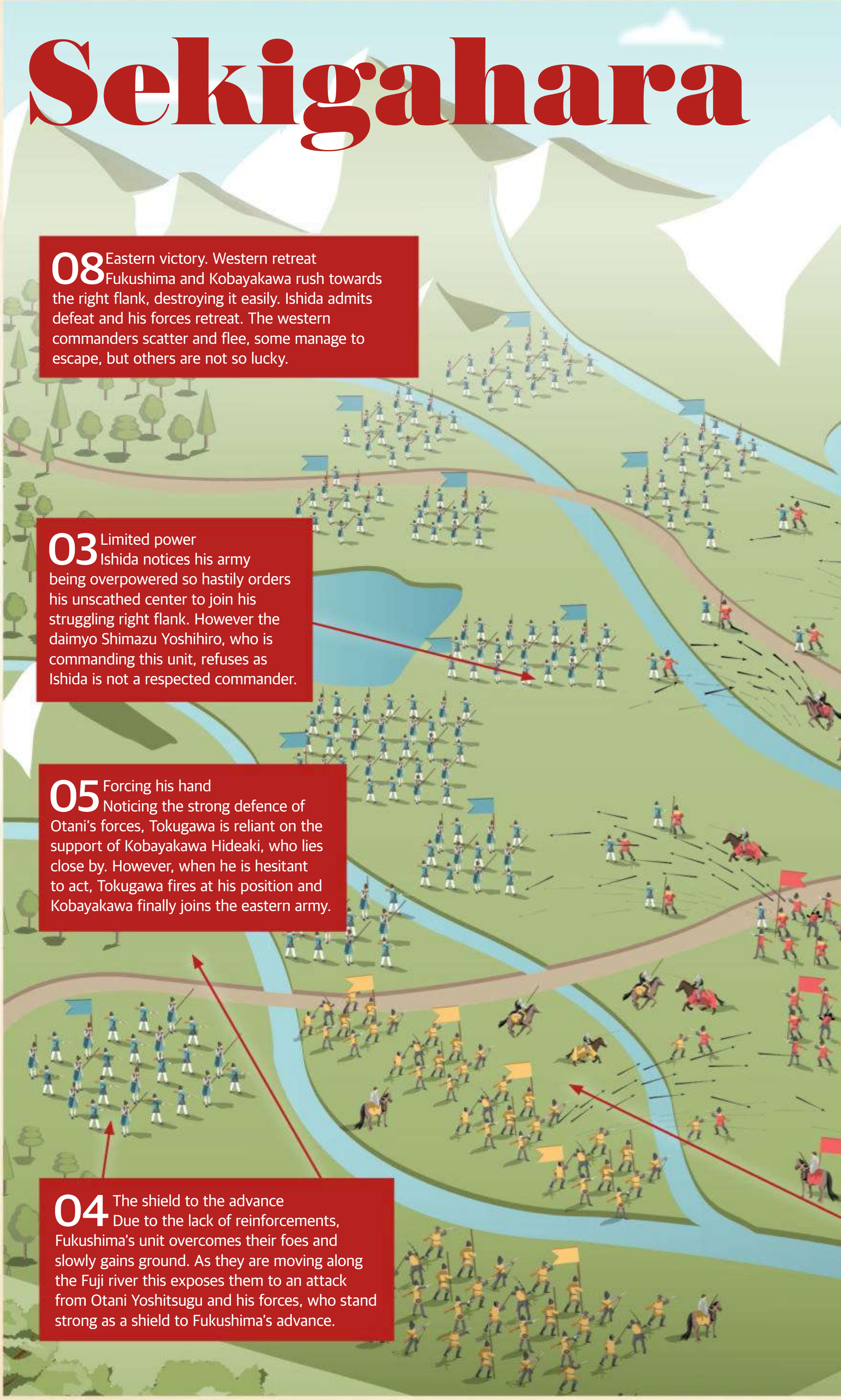
However, Yoshitsugu and Mitsunari already suspected Kobayakawa's potential betrayal long before the battle, so they had prepared for his defection. Kobayakawa's force of 15,000 men crashed into Yoshitsugu's sturdy forces, who had turned to face the turncoats head-on, and fought them back bravely with their fresh, dry gunpowder. Although this rendered Kobayakawa's charge largely ineffective, Yoshitsugu came under immense and growing pressure. With these extra opponents on the field, under the command of several mighty samurai, there was no denying it - he was totally outnumbered.

Seeing Yoshitsugu barely holding out against such odds, one by one four western generals and their troops switched sides and swarmed upon the exposed Yoshitsugu forces from all sides. The effect was decisive - the inflated eastern forces overwhelmed the western defenders on the left flank. Seeing this, and that defeat was inevitable, Yoshitsugu took the only decision that honour left him and opened his stomach with his own sword to end his life.

FUKUSHIMA'S UNENDING CHARGE

With Yoshitsugu's defeat, his forces quickly retreated from the field and left the western

Sekigahara

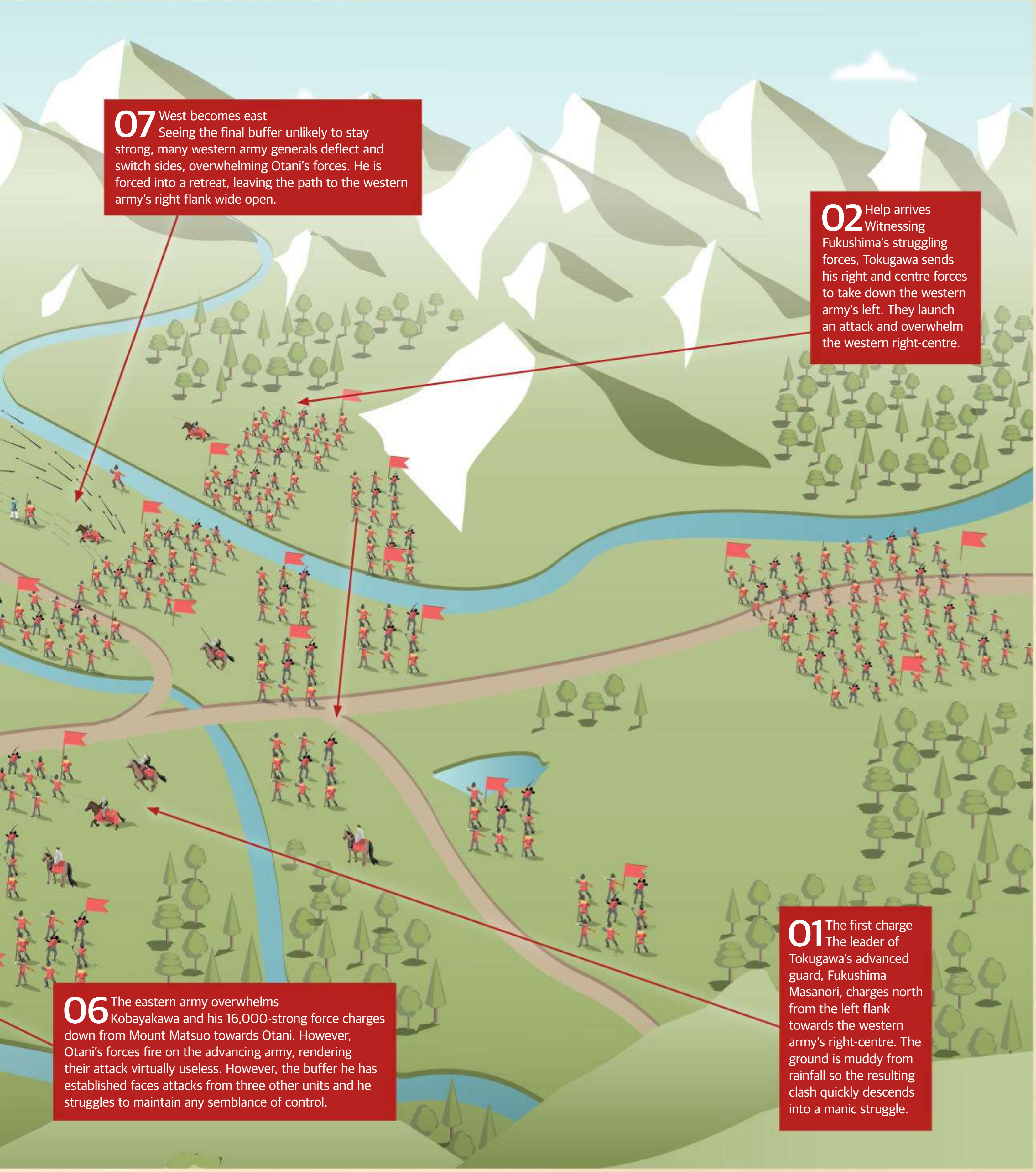


08 **Eastern victory. Western retreat**
Fukushima and Kobayakawa rush towards the right flank, destroying it easily. Ishida admits defeat and his forces retreat. The western commanders scatter and flee, some manage to escape, but others are not so lucky.

03 **Limited power**
Ishida notices his army being overpowered so hastily orders his unscathed center to join his struggling right flank. However the daimyo Shimazu Yoshihiro, who is commanding this unit, refuses as Ishida is not a respected commander.

05 **Forcing his hand**
Noticing the strong defence of Otani's forces, Tokugawa is reliant on the support of Kobayakawa Hideaki, who lies close by. However, when he is hesitant to act, Tokugawa fires at his position and Kobayakawa finally joins the eastern army.

04 **The shield to the advance**
Due to the lack of reinforcements, Fukushima's unit overcomes their foes and slowly gains ground. As they are moving along the Fuji river this exposes them to an attack from Otani Yoshitsugu and his forces, who stand strong as a shield to Fukushima's advance.



07 West becomes east

Seeing the final buffer unlikely to stay strong, many western army generals deflect and switch sides, overwhelming Otani's forces. He is forced into a retreat, leaving the path to the western army's right flank wide open.

02 Help arrives

Witnessing Fukushima's struggling forces, Tokugawa sends his right and centre forces to take down the western army's left. They launch an attack and overwhelm the western right-centre.

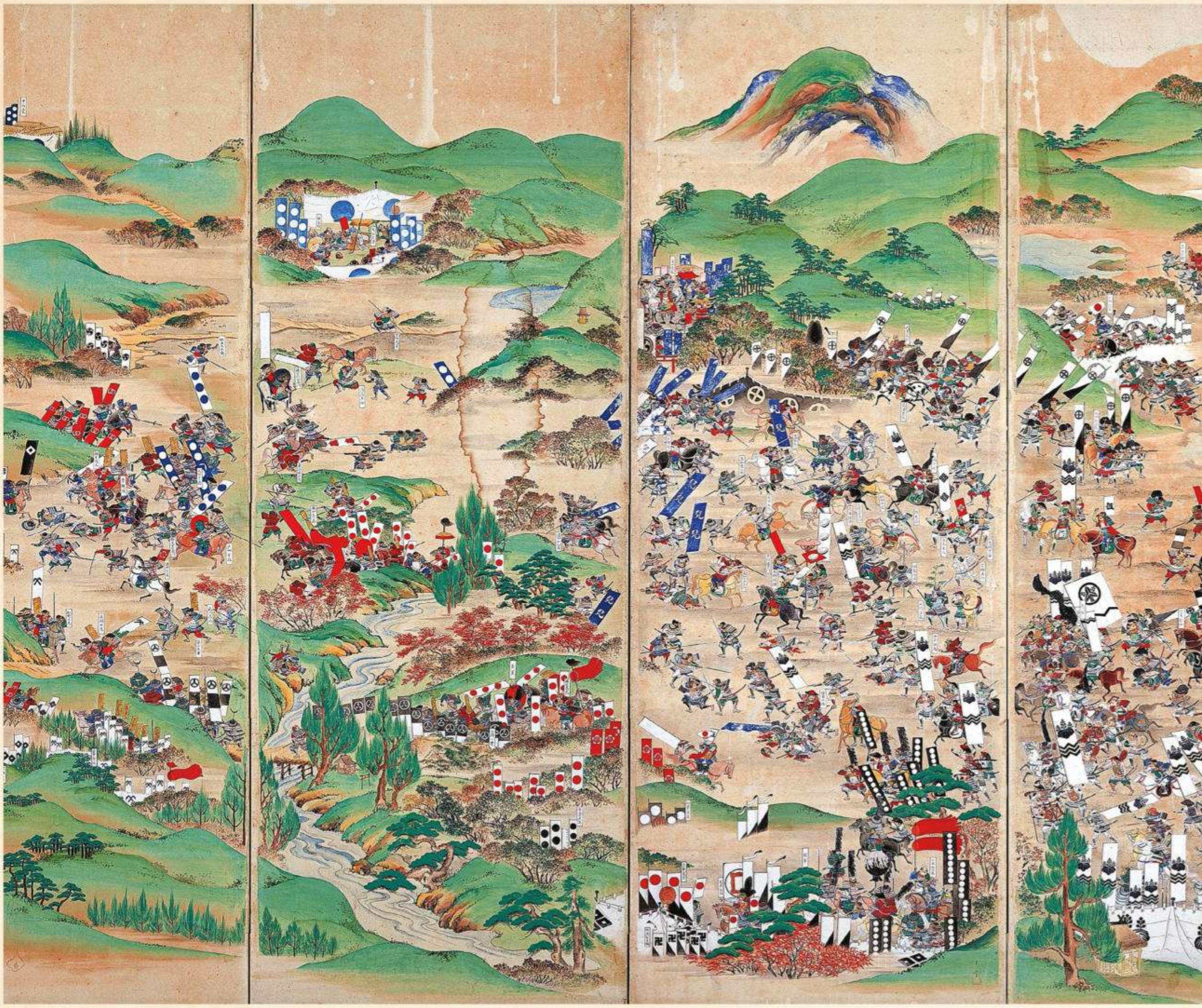
06 The eastern army overwhelms

Kobayakawa and his 16,000-strong force charges down from Mount Matsuo towards Otani. However, Otani's forces fire on the advancing army, rendering their attack virtually useless. However, the buffer he has established faces attacks from three other units and he struggles to maintain any semblance of control.

01 The first charge

The leader of Tokugawa's advanced guard, Fukushima Masanori, charges north from the left flank towards the western army's right-centre. The ground is muddy from rainfall so the resulting clash quickly descends into a manic struggle.

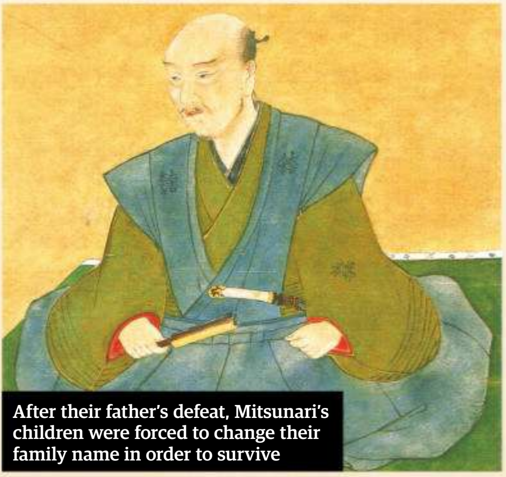
Ed Crooks



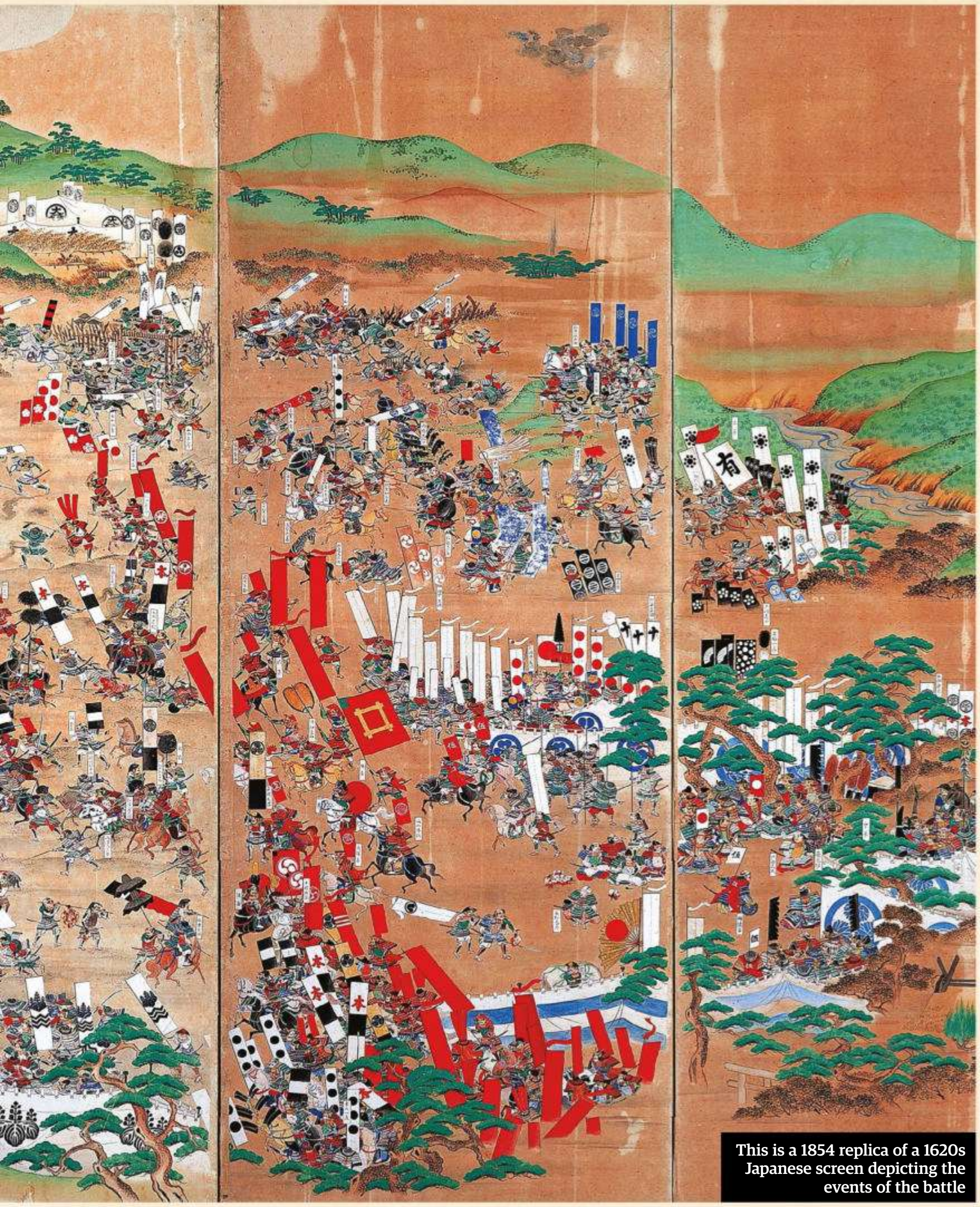
army's right flank free for the taking. Fukushima and Kobayakawa, now united in one huge, powerful force, thundered towards the right flank and destroyed it. At this point the eastern samurai outnumbered what remained of the loyal western force and their attack was swift and brutal. They continued the attack and advanced on the western centre. Mitsunari, his confidence shattered by the multitudes of betrayals, realised that with his shield decimated, defeat was imminent. With the same calculated intelligence that prompted the formation of his army, he ordered the retreat and fled up the northern hill slopes, hoping to find shelter in Mount Ibuki, the highest mountain of the region. The western army followed his lead, scattering and fleeing into the mountains. Although some managed to escape unscathed, Tokugawa's forces chased, captured and triumphantly killed many of the fleeing western commanders.

Tokugawa's eastern army had won, but later into the day forces absent from the battle finally began to arrive at Sekigahara. His own son, Hidetada, faced his father's wrath when he arrived late with over 38,000 men – a force that could have won him the battle quicker and therefore with less bloodshed.

Hidetada had been distracted attempting to capture another castle, Ueda, against his father's orders. Even some of Mitsunari's men had been held up – 15,000 troops slowed down by another conflict along the way. Had some of these troops

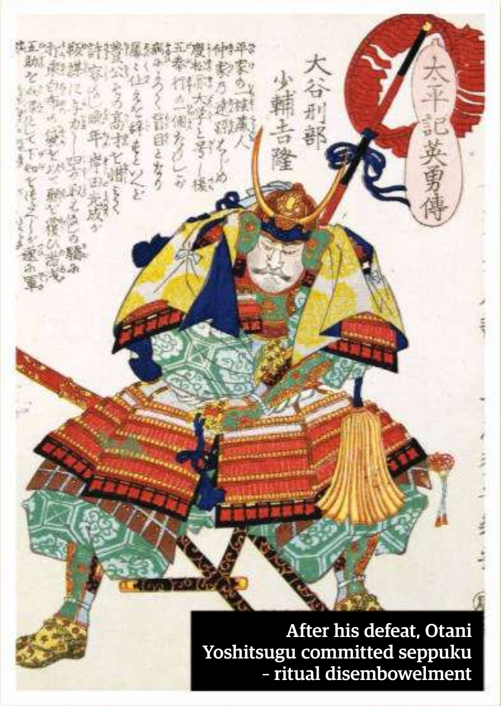


After their father's defeat, Mitsunari's children were forced to change their family name in order to survive



This is a 1854 replica of a 1620s Japanese screen depicting the events of the battle

The site of the battle as it appears today, commemorated with a memorial



After his defeat, Otani Yoshitsugu committed seppuku – ritual disembowelment

arrived sooner, the result, and Japan's future, may have ended up very different.

THE FUTURE OF JAPAN

Mitsunari didn't evade his victorious adversary for very long. Villagers loyal to the now all-powerful Tokugawa caught the fleeing samurai and handed him over to his enemies, who beheaded him in Kyoto along with several other powerful western daimyo. Tokugawa had to be sure his rule wouldn't be challenged by any other powerful men with dubious allegiances. As an example to others, Mitsunari's head was placed on a stand for all to see – a strong warning to anyone who dared to even contemplate rising up against the new shogun and his regime.

Tokugawa was true to his word, after the battle he redistributed the lands to those who had fought by his side and who kepttheir vows to change sides. Those who fought against him paid dearly. Toyotomi territories fell into his hands and pockets of Toyotomi support quickly faded after the public executions of the western leaders. Three years after the Battle of Sekigahara, Emperor Go-Yozei appointed Tokugawa shogun of Japan, and the battle soon became celebrated as one of the most important victories in the nation's history. At 60 years old, Tokugawa outlived and rose above all the powerful men of his generation in every possible way. Aware his years left on earth were few, he began to concentrate on strengthening his shogunate and eliminating the last remaining Toyotomi clan members in one final bloody clash at Osaka Castle.

With nobody around with enough power to challenge his rule, Tokugawa ensured his ancestors would rule the country for another 250 years. Although it emerged through bloody means, the Edo period under the shogunate is remembered as the last period of traditional Japan, before the aggressive westernisation of the 19th-century's Meiji Restoration.

Meanwhile, the Mori, Shimazu and Chosokabe clans maintained their contempt for the Tokugawa family, and this disdain was so strong it would pass down to their descendants. They would eventually rise together to bring the Tokugawa dynasty to its knees.

Isolation nation

The Tokugawa shoguns reigned over an empire closed to the outside world – until they were forced to prise it open

Written by Alice Barnes-Brown

Swaddled in robes that concealed both his weaponry and considerable girth, the victorious warrior Tokugawa Ieyasu quietly took a seat on the soft tatami mats in Kyoto's Imperial Palace. Emperor Go-Yōzei sat one step above him, as was the natural order of things in those days, but make no mistake – Ieyasu held all the power. He had come to ask the emperor a question he couldn't refuse. He wanted to be shogun.

He was the only man in Honshu who could make such an audacious claim. Ieyasu, a military mastermind born to a daimyo (feudal lord) family, had triumphed over the ruling Toyotomi clan at the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. The usurper then spent the first three years of the 17th century unifying Japan and establishing dominance over other regional powerholders, either killing off disloyal daimyo or placating them with large tracts of land. By the time he got to the emperor in 1603, he was the most powerful man in Japan.

Seal of approval from the emperor received, the new shogun holed himself up in Edo Castle, a heavily fortified and moated complex at the heart of what would become Tokyo. From this new capital city, Ieyasu drew up his plans for a new governmental system (bakufu) that would ensure he wouldn't lose his power as quickly as he had gained it. The 270 remaining daimyo were reorganised along Tokugawa terms. Loyal daimyo (fudai) were placed in strategic positions near Edo, Kyoto and Osaka, whereas troublemakers (tozama) were relegated to Japan's outermost provinces.

CLASS OF ITS OWN

Ieyasu didn't stop at reshuffling the government – he turned his attention next to the rest of society. If Japan's class system limited upwards mobility before, Ieyasu made it literally illegal. Below the emperor and his court was the shogun, followed by the daimyo, then the samurai.

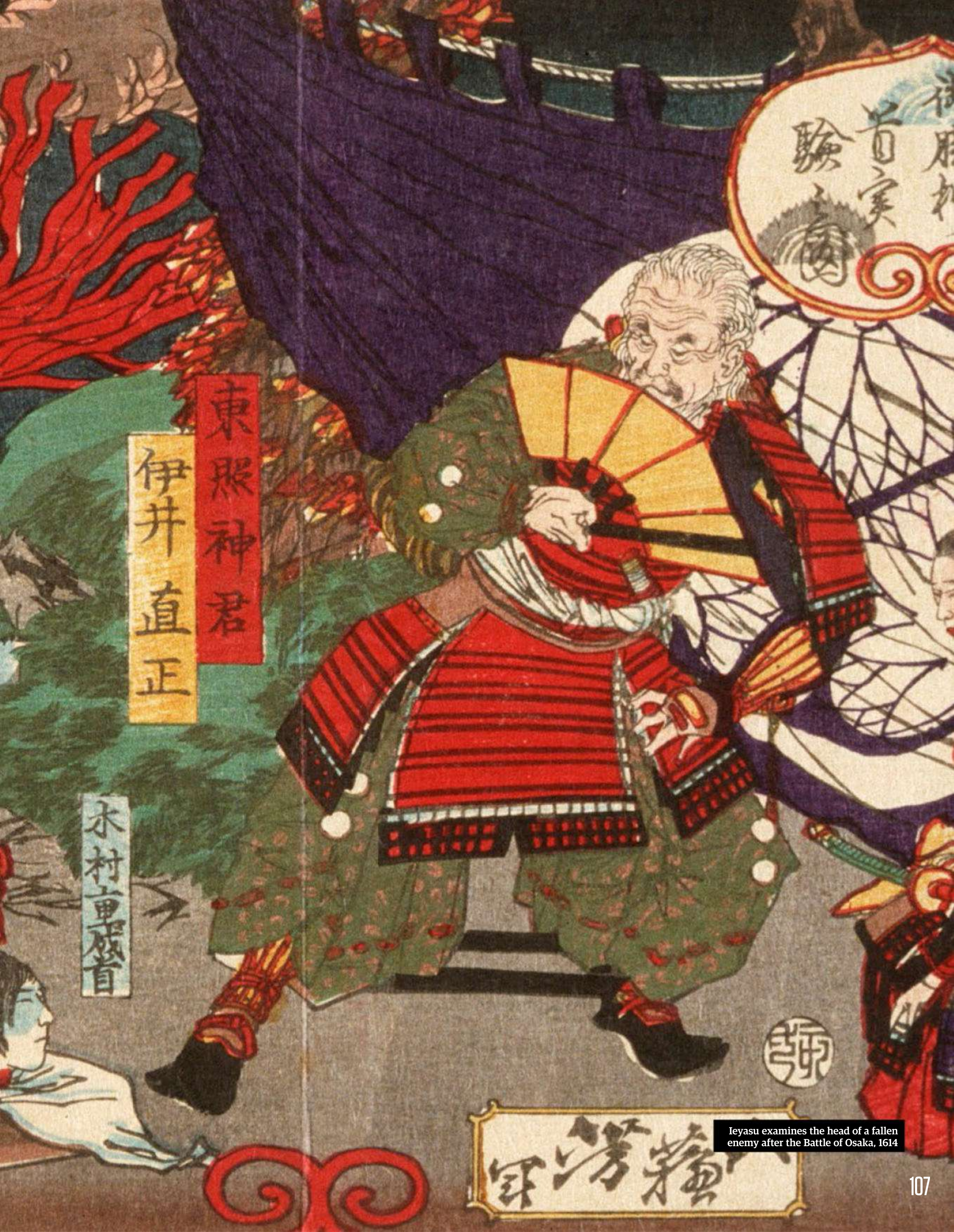
All samurai were bound to their local daimyo, just as all the daimyo were bound to the shogun. In return for their submission, the samurai were paid a stipend, based on rice farming harvests. If they wished to defect from their daimyo overlords, a samurai would have to give up his weapons and join the peasantry, who comprised about 80 per cent of the population.

Few did, because life for an Edo-era peasant was difficult. The burden of the samurai stipends took up to half of their crop, and there was no chance of making a better life as peasants couldn't engage in anything other than agriculture, or even travel far outside their province. The one upside to being a peasant was the respect it afforded, as Japan's wealth and prosperity came mostly from rice farming. Sadly, this was usually only theoretical.

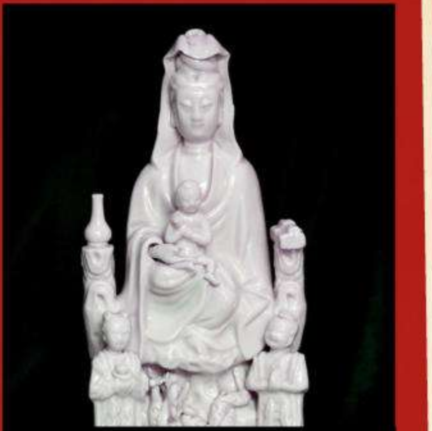
Beneath the peasantry were the artisans, then detested merchants, who were held in great suspicion for their profiteering and confined to live in specific urban districts. Below them, the 'untouchables' – people that violated Buddhist principles, such as animal slaughterers, executioners and prostitutes. Ironically, their services were often in heavy demand.

CLOSING THE DOOR

In 1605, just two years after being made shogun, Ieyasu abdicated in favour of his son Hidetada, establishing the Tokugawa dynasty. But never a man to desire retirement, Ieyasu continued to operate as the power behind the throne until his death in 1616.


東照神君
伊井直正
木村重成首
首実
験之図
芳年

Ieyasu examines the head of a fallen enemy after the Battle of Osaka, 1614



Buddhist goddesses such as Guanyin (Avalokiteśvara) were frequently used by kakure kirishitans to covertly represent the Virgin Mary

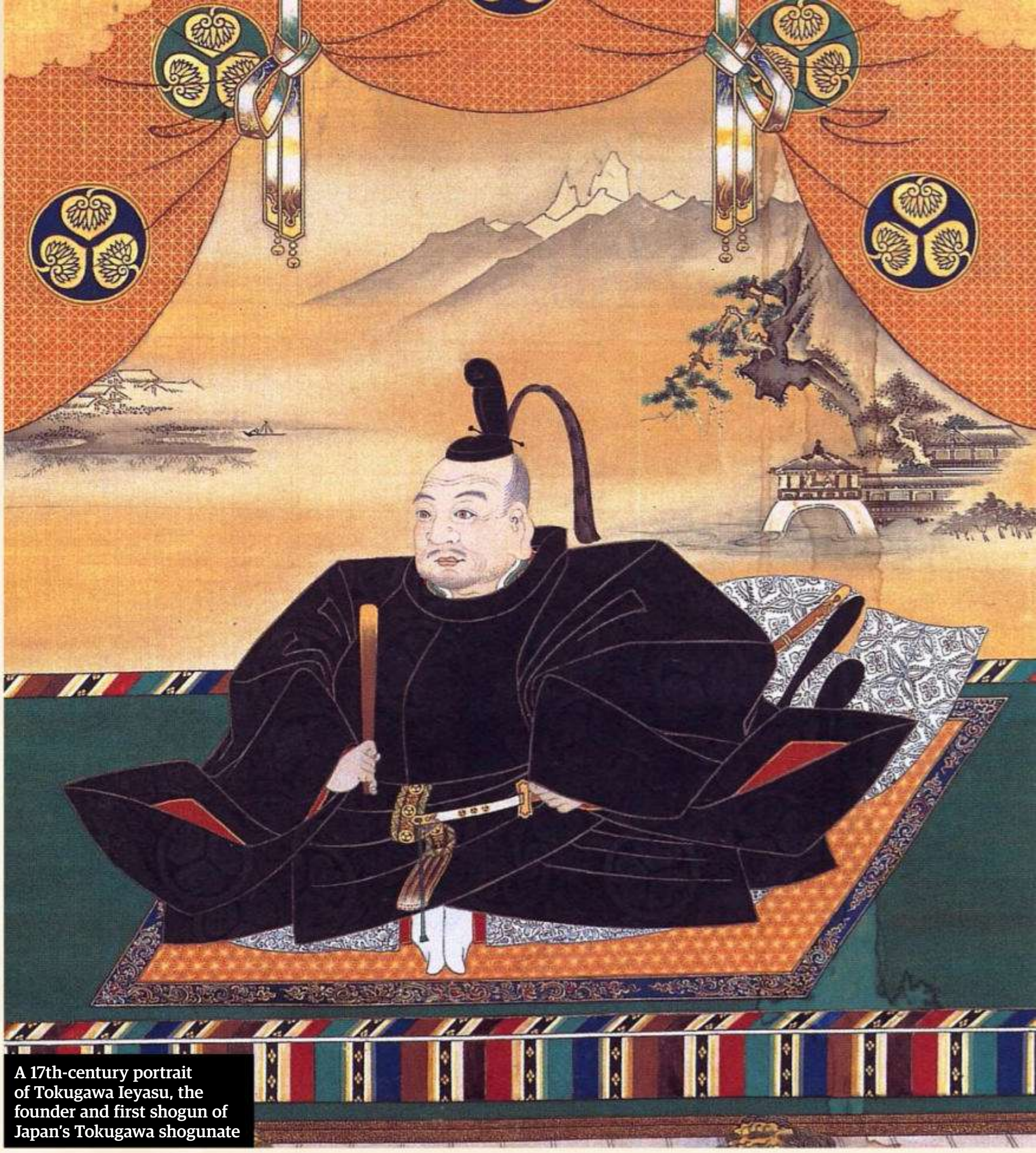
Christianity goes underground

The head of a teenage samurai who dared disobey the Tokugawa is spiked onto a pole outside Nagasaki, and thrust into the ground, as a warning to anyone who might think to challenge the shogun. You have been warned – practice Christianity, and you'll be martyred.

Amakusa Shirō was a 17-year-old noble born to Roman Catholic parents. His forefathers and mothers had converted to Christianity after hearing the preaching of Portuguese missionaries, but after Christianity was officially banned by the shogunate in 1613, it became increasingly difficult to practice Christian traditions. So, the charismatic Christian teen led an impromptu army of peasants and masterless samurai (rōnin) in the 1637-38 Shimabara Rebellion, taking over Hara Castle. After five long months, the insurrection was defeated, Shirō executed, and 300,000 Japanese Christians were subjected to religious persecution.

Suspected Christians were tested with blasphemous rituals, such as the fumi-e, where a person was made to step on the image of the face of Christ. They were also required to register at their local Buddhist temple. But punitive measures didn't stop them from devoutly practicing their faith. Instead, Christianity simply went underground, with prayers taking place in secret rooms in the house, and Christian icons swapped out for Buddhist ones. Sakoku meant that Japanese Christians had no contact with other Christians, so 'kakure kirishitans' (as hidden Christians are now known) developed their own distinctive take on this imported religion.

In 2018, the Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region were finally recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.



A 17th-century portrait of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder and first shogun of Japan's Tokugawa shogunate

For the first time, Japan was not at war with itself, and could focus on the outside world for a change. European traders from Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands had landed on Nippon's shores a century prior, and the unusual goods they brought with them – from eyeglasses to guns – were a hit. Ieyasu saw the benefits of working with these outsiders, not only allowing them to establish trading posts in Japan, but also to settle in the country, if they chose. He personally exchanged gifts with King James I of England (including a new-fangled telescope), keen to establish diplomatic relations with this rich new ally on the other side of the world.

The downside of these foreigners was that they brought an alien religion with them, one that was fast gaining followers, particularly in the area around the port of Nagasaki. For other East Asian nations, Christian missionaries opened the floodgate to full-scale colonisation. Even mighty China had seen Macao siphoned off by the Portuguese. Tokugawa Ieyasu's successors were determined that this should never, ever happen to the country they had fought so hard to win. Why should such a proud, ancient culture need imports from abroad, anyway?

To nip colonialism in the bud, Ieyasu's grandson Tokugawa Iemitsu issued three 'sakoku' ('closed country') edicts in the 1630s that would change Japanese culture, history and even language forever. In 1633, travelling abroad was officially banned for all Japanese citizens. In 1635, Japanese citizens abroad were forbidden to return, on pain of death, and all foreign shipping was restricted to the artificial island of Dejima in Nagasaki. The final edict in 1639 expelled foreigners altogether, except the few Dutch and Chinese traders permitted to stay on Dejima. Japan was officially closed for business.

Western ideas were cast off, and Buddhism, Shintoism and neo-Confucianism became the philosophies of the state. Even receiving a letter from abroad could get you and your whole family killed, such was the fear that Western perspectives could infiltrate Japan and lead to colonialism. An emphasis was placed on the traditional Japanese way of life, which was placed at odds with the customs of barbaric foreigners.

With no internal or external enemies to combat, the samurai gradually fell into bureaucratic jobs, while the daimyo raked in taxes as bountiful agricultural production created surpluses. The cushty merchants, once hated, grew wealthy as a result of political stability and the growing domestic economy. They created their own urban culture, free to pursue leisure and pleasure, while the samurai were discouraged from enjoying such frivolities, bound as they were by their strict moral code called bushidō.

From 1688 to 1704, the Genroku period saw the traditional Japanese arts explode, free to develop entirely without the influence of other cultures. Kabuki dance theatre kept the urbanites enthralled with its dramatic movements, while they marvelled at bunraku puppet performances. Poignant haiku poetry grew out of an earlier form of satirical prose, haikai, which made listeners laugh until their bellies ached.

STRUGGLING SAMURAI

Sakoku and the prosperity of the commercial classes may have enriched Japan culturally, but it fundamentally altered the traditional rice-based economy. Without new technology from abroad, and a lack of class mobility at home to encourage innovation, agriculture stagnated throughout the 18th century. The samurai and daimyo, who relied upon good rice harvests for their income, fell on hard times. Many took out loans from wealthy merchants and businessmen to stay afloat, a source of great shame for this noble class.

Financial troubles shot through the shogunate. Coupled with famine and increasingly higher taxes to prop up the government, the peasants decided that enough was enough. 20 famines between 1675 and 1837 meant the bakufu spent a lot of energy quelling rural uprisings.

> "Even receiving a letter from abroad could get you and your whole family killed"

But there was another problem brewing on the horizon. A Danish sailor called Shpanberg, acting on behalf of Russia, landed in Kamogawa, Chiba, in 1739. His party may have been chased from Chiba, but the incident showed that the outside world would soon come knocking.

By the time of Matthew Perry's arrival in 1853, the Tokugawa shogunate was so brittle and worn down by infighting and a lack of resources that it wasn't in a position to challenge thinly veiled American threats. So, with the signing of the "unequal treaty" (otherwise known as the Harris Treaty), sakoku came to an end.

Enter the bakumatsu, or 'end of the bakufu'. Disaffected, anti-foreign and influential daimyo in the southwestern domains of Satsuma and Chōshū joined up with conservative samurai to deliver the killer blow to the shogunate and restore the emperor to his traditional position on the Chrysanthemum Throne.

When political manoeuvres failed to prevent the signing of the humiliating Harris Treaty, the so-called "Satcho alliance" armed themselves with the powerful newly available Western weaponry, and overwhelmed the last Tokugawa shogun (with considerably less manpower) in 1866. A couple of years later, the emperor was handed back control of Japan once again, ushering in the Meiji Restoration.

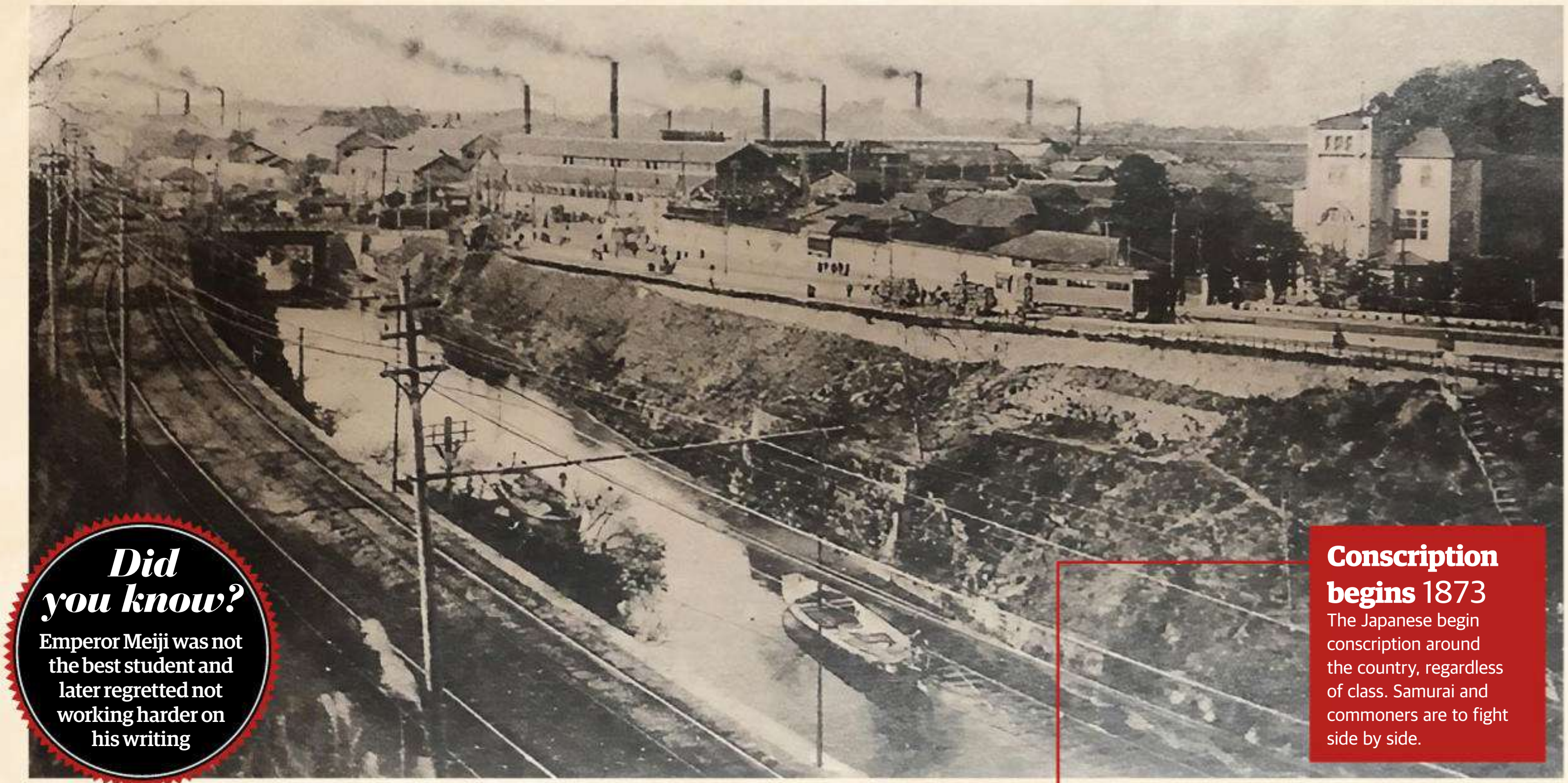
A lengthy 250 years of Tokugawa rule had brought about unprecedented peace, and it had allowed a unique culture to flourish within the bubble it created for itself. But the shogunate was, in many ways, a victim of its own success. Despite the best efforts of Tokugawa traditionalists, the capitalist economy that naturally grew out of political stability overtook agricultural cultivation – without Western help.

Inflexibility imposed by the early shoguns meant that society was unable to change with the times, and without a purpose, the samurai lost the pride that had long sustained them. Ieyasu could hardly have imagined that destroying Japan's age-old power dynamic to place himself at the top would ultimately pave the way for his dynasty's disappointing decline.

Castles played a key role in the bakufu. To limit the power of samurai and daimyo, only one castle was permitted per region

© Getty Images

Samurai in the Meiji era



Did you know?

Emperor Meiji was not the best student and later regretted not working harder on his writing

Conscription begins 1873

The Japanese begin conscription around the country, regardless of class. Samurai and commoners are to fight side by side.

Assassination of Sakamoto Ryōma

1867

After helping to plan for a regime change in Japan, samurai Sakamoto Ryōma is assassinated on 10 December. His killers are pro-shoganal samurai.

Iwakura Mission

1871

More than 100 officials set sail to gather information in order to create a new Japan. They visit 12 countries to research Western politics, culture, religion, military methods recreation and more. The voyage would take 18 months in total.

Osaka Conference

1875

The three major leaders of Meiji Japan unite to plan a representative assembly. A Senate, an Assembly of Prefectural Governors and a Supreme Court are all founded.

1867 1868 1869 1870 1873

The Charter Oath

1868

Written by a group of samurai (the new emperor was only 15 at the time), the Charter Oath outlines the original principles of the Meiji era – mainly modernisation.

Land grab

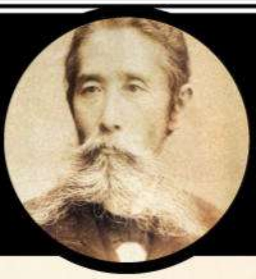
1870

In a move designed to strengthen central power, former feudal lords are commanded to return their lands to the emperor.

Aikoku Kōtō

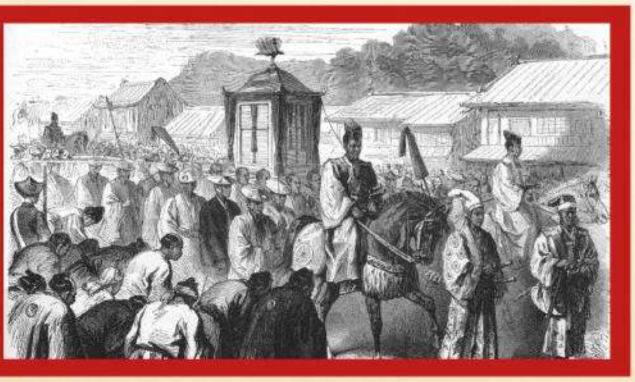
1874

The Public Party of Patriots is founded. Generally accepted as Japan's first political party, it disbands soon after its formation.



The Meiji Restoration 1868

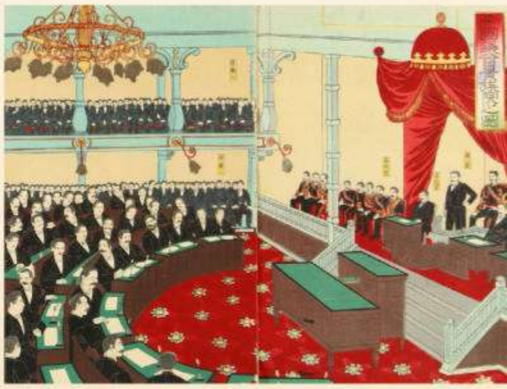
The Edo shogunate comes to an end when imperial rule is reinstated. Dubbed as the Meiji Restoration, it is a political revolution led primarily by the samurai. They overthrow Tokugawa Yoshinobu and replace him with Prince Mutsuhito, who becomes Emperor Meiji.

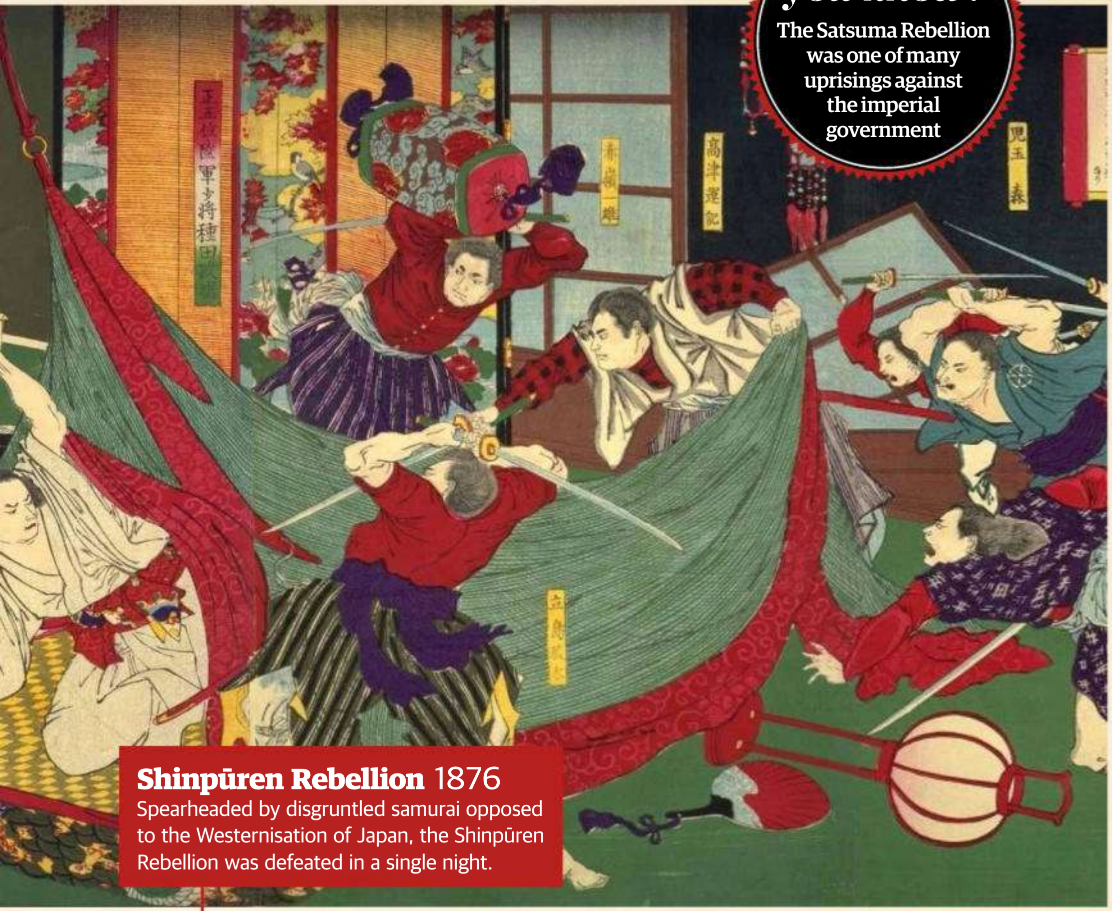


The Kazoku

1869

The old hierarchy is replaced. Upper and middle samurai become shizoku, while other samurai become sotsuzoku. All are given a pension.





Did you know?

The Satsuma Rebellion was one of many uprisings against the imperial government

Death of Saigō Takamori 1877

One of the most influential samurai of the 19th century, Takamori perishes during the Battle of Shiroyama. He is known as the last great samurai.

Shinpūren Rebellion 1876

Spearheaded by disgruntled samurai opposed to the Westernisation of Japan, the Shinpūren Rebellion was defeated in a single night.

Did you know?

Some samurai used their forbidden swords to assassinate officials

Stipends to bonds 1876

After having enjoyed a nice stipend, the samurai class soon found it highly taxed. In 1874 they are given the opportunity to convert their stipends to bonds, and this becomes compulsory in 1876. It's one more nail in the coffin for the samurai class.

Imperial Rescript 1882

In a sign that times are changing, the Imperial Rescript on Education is enshrined in law. Students are now taught to be unwavering in their support of the imperial throne.

1876 1877 1878 1885 1890

The Satsuma Rebellion 1877

A pocket of samurai face off against a 30,000-strong imperial army in a last stand against the new Westernised regime. Satsuma (home to a vast number of unemployed people since the end of the samurai class) witnesses a rebellion that lasts from January to September.

Takebashi Incident 1878

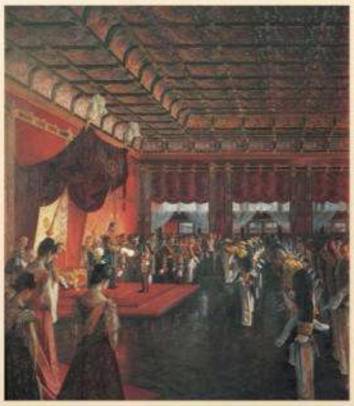
260 members of the imperial army mutiny. They haven't seen payment for their role in quashing the Satsuma Rebellion. After their defeat, 53 of them are executed.

Abolition of the Dajokan system 1885

The Japanese cabinet is finally created and as a result the three-tier Dajokan system is abolished. Japan is becoming more Westernised.

The Haitō Edict 1876

Once the honour of every samurai, carrying swords in public is now made illegal in Japan. Now they're only allowed at a handful of formal ceremonies. For some time efforts have been made to stop the carrying of swords, and it is finally achieved in 1876.



The Meiji Constitution 1890

With the aim of making Japan a respected player on the world stage and on par with the Western powers, a constitution is created. Much like Britain, parliament has an upper and an elected lower house, along with a prime minister and cabinet appointed by the emperor.

Last stand of the samurai

Disgruntled feudal warriors rise up against their government in a tragic clash that sees tradition and modernity collide on the battlefield

Written by Miguel Miranda

It was a cold September morning, hours from the first glimmers of dawn. Exhausted samurai huddled crouched in ditches and dugouts they had unearthed to protect themselves from the gunfire below. Their crude shelters formed an unsightly patchwork on the scenic hilltop of Shiroyama, which was perhaps Kagoshima's best-known landmark after the majestic Mount Sakurajima across its harbour.

These samurai camped in Shiroyama were led by a remarkable man, Saigo Takamori, who embodied the ideals of his class. He conducted himself with magnanimity and good breeding expected of a samurai and statesman, but he was also possessed by a deep-seated patriotism that manifested in dreams of waging war abroad. It was, admittedly, a characteristic lust for battle typical among his class.

Posthumous accounts of his ordeal at Shiroyama report he was ensconced in a trench six feet deep. It was likely he was ailing and exhausted, as were most of his men. A month earlier he led a perilous flight from nearby Hyuga where they escaped encirclement and annihilation by overwhelming Imperial forces. Within a week they had fought their way to Kagoshima and almost overwhelmed the token force defending it, but their ammunition was depleted and enemy reinforcements were hot on their trail. Taking whatever supplies they could, they made their last stand on Shiroyama.

Fewer than 400 samurai remained from the 20,000 who rallied behind Saigo in February. He was a retainer and trusted adviser of the Shimazus, a powerful clan with a long martial tradition whose domain included Satsuma, Osumi and Hyuga. Owing to their location – the southern fringe of Kyushu – the Shimazu's relations with the central government, at first the Tokugawa Shoguns and then the Emperor Meiji's administration, were always tenuous.

The Shimazus were imperialists and xenophobes imbued with a conquering spirit. Having helped end the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1867, their leaders envisioned a new role for themselves as Japan's empire builders, and it would be their samurai who would annex the Korean peninsula and beyond using modern weapons. The Empire of Japan would henceforth rise among the nations without peer and remain so for as long as the Sun cast its golden rays on their homeland.

This isn't what happened. In February 1877, the hardliners among the Satsuma samurai mobilised and gathered their arms. Saigo, incensed by reports that policemen from Tokyo had been sent to Kagoshima with the express purpose of arranging his assassination, assumed leadership over this unruly legion. It was a fitting role for a hero of the Boshin Civil War, from 1868-69, which established the Meiji government's dominance, a transition recognised by history

> "Even if these rebellious samurai could rely on popular support and an intimate knowledge of terrain, their crusade was still precarious"

as the Restoration that set Japan on the path to modernity.

Now, Saigo and his rebel samurai were going to challenge the same government they so ardently fought for in previous years. They soon laid siege to Kumamoto Castle, situated west of Satsuma and a symbol of Tokyo's authority. Government reinforcements were mobilised and transported with utmost haste to Kyushu, and their numbers, firepower, and expert leadership wore down Saigo's battalions. Even if these rebellious samurai could rely on popular support and an intimate knowledge of terrain, their crusade was still precarious.

Kumamoto Castle survived a bitter siege and the Satsuma rebels were soon routed. From June until August, not a single battle they fought resulted in victory although their grim determination and unorthodox tactics wrought havoc on the conscripts and policemen dispatched to fight them. However, guerilla wars are often fruitless endeavours, and in the fashion of 19th-century conflicts where traditional arms battled modern (European) counterparts, the former succumbed.

What was left of Saigo's legion was trapped in Shiroyama. The date was 24 September 1877, and beneath their miserable assemblage were 30,000 Imperial troops led by Prince Arisugawa Taruhito, an aristocrat tasked with conquering Satsuma in the emperor's name.

His regiments might have comprised peasants conscripted to swell the Imperial Army's ranks, but they weren't inferior fighting men. On the contrary, thanks to the drill imposed by French instructors, they disported themselves with the efficiency and organisation familiar among European armies. Even their arms and uniform were of French origin.

These early-modern Japanese soldiers were equipped with the Minié rifle, which featured superb range, a powerful cartridge and general ease of use. As a matter of fact, both Springfield and Enfield, the leading gun makers in the United States and Britain, manufactured it under license. Owing to a dearth of historical research on the period, it's unknown if these Japanese Minié rifles were of the older muzzle-loading variety or the newer breech loaders, but perhaps it was the latter.

The Imperial forces were equipped with artillery too. More than 100 pieces of varying calibres were sufficient to subdue the remaining Satsuma rebels in the final struggle for Shiroyama. It was a British diplomat and adventurer, Augustus H Mounsey, who provided the English-speaking world with an authoritative account of the conflict in his book, The Satsuma Rebellion.

Published two years after the events it describes, Mounsey's rich detail captures the final hours of the doomed rebels: "Before dawn of the 24th of September a tremendous shower of shells was poured on the summit of the hill, and under its cover and in the darkness the

Samurai of the Satsuma domain in the 1860s, during the Boshin War, in which they fought against the shogunate, on the side of Emperor Meiji

assaulting parties quickly scaled its slopes. They reached its brow almost without loss and thence fired volley upon volley with deadly effect into the rebel camp… the rebels had been taken unawares and unprepared for a serious attack… they resisted, as far as men could resist… but the contest was too unequal to last. Saigo was amongst the first to fall."

According to Mounsey's narrative, as Saigo drew his last breath, a lieutenant of his named Hemmi Jiuroda completed the rite of hara-kiri by decapitating his master. A servant then retrieved the severed head and attempted to bury it. It was found, however, and Saigo's bloodied remains were brought down to Kagoshima later in the day.

This was the ignominious end of Satsuma's legendary uprising and the men who fought it – the samurai. To think it all began with a redress of grievances.

THOSE WHO SERVE

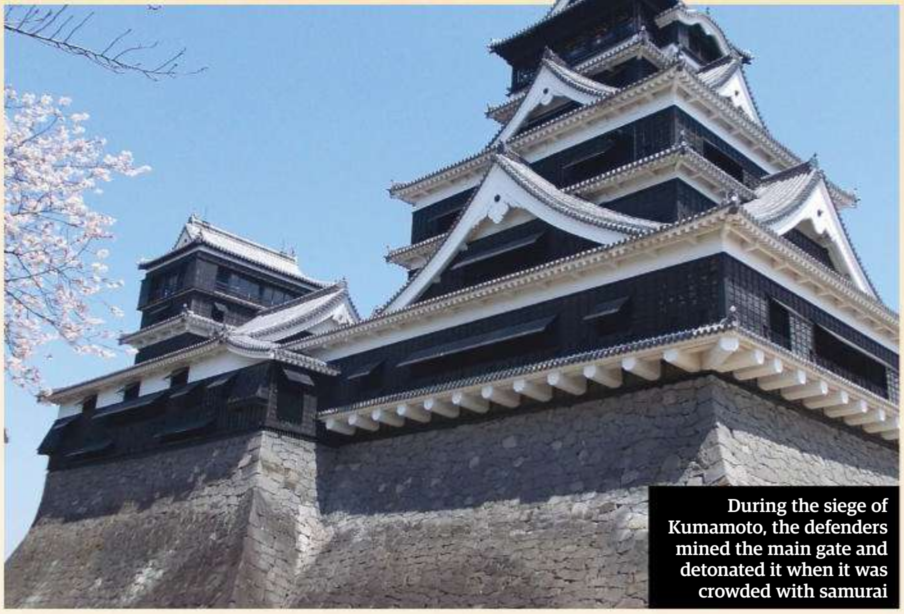
An assessment of its historical record shows Japanese civilisation has a lineage stretching 4,000 years into the past and perhaps further back to the mythic circumstances that created fabled Yamato from the Pacific Ocean's volcanic periphery. The emblematic samurai and their warrior ethos, however, only emerged in the last 1,000 years. The general consensus regarding the beginning of their existence is that they emerged in the 12th century, during the Kamakura period that began when Minamoto Yoritomo was recognised as Japan's first true Shogun, or feudal overlord.

The institution that was the Shogunate, erected on a foundation composed of samurai warrior clans, depended on an exacting feudal system where petty warlords pretended deference towards a central government while at the same time scheming to undermine it and advance their own power. This was the political landscape of Japan for several centuries until the Meiji Restoration.

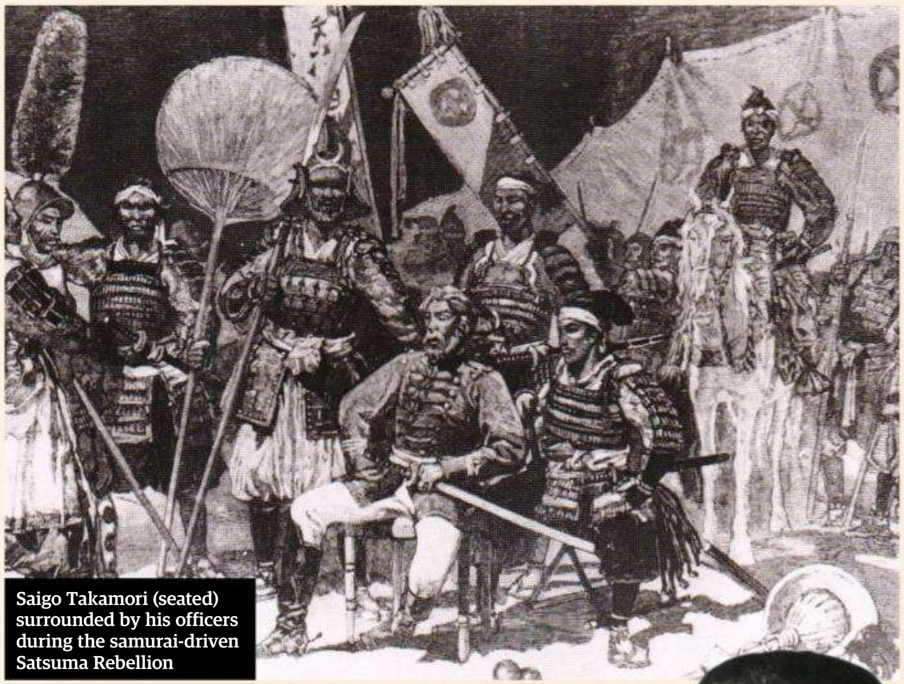
Yet the samurai and its occupation may have an even earlier genesis. In the first millennium of what Western Europe deems the Common Era, a centralised state had already emerged in the main island Honshu. Its epicentre was the lush Kanto Plain, a stretch of fertile land facing the Pacific Ocean and ringed by mountains.

At around the same period when Byzantine Rome was at its height, an ancient Imperial dynasty not only governed Japan but pursued foreign conquests in the Korean peninsula, a struggle that frequently embroiled the Chinese state beyond the Yellow Sea. For almost 200

> "Thanks to the drill imposed by French instructors, they disported themselves with the efficiency and organisation familiar among European armies"



During the siege of Kumamoto, the defenders mined the main gate and detonated it when it was crowded with samurai



Saigo Takamori (seated) surrounded by his officers during the samurai-driven Satsuma Rebellion

years a Japanese enclave in Southern Korea called Mimana was reputed to have existed before it fell to a rival kingdom.

Japan's emperors during the first millennium were hardly the cloistered sovereigns they later became. As far back as the 2nd century the legendary Empress Jingu-Kogo carried out an invasion of Korea and further consolidated power at home. This pattern would continually manifest for centuries to come. Whenever Japan entered a period of domestic stability, it would aspire to carve out an overseas domain.

Being an archipelago of mountains and hills, the empire's frontiers were tenuous. Government control was strongest in the Kanto all the way to the provinces surrounding the ancient Imperial capital of Kyoto. Meanwhile, much of Northern Japan and the

Saigo Takamori
'The last true samurai'

A pragmatist at heart, Saigo was almost the least likely to rise in arms against the very government he helped establish

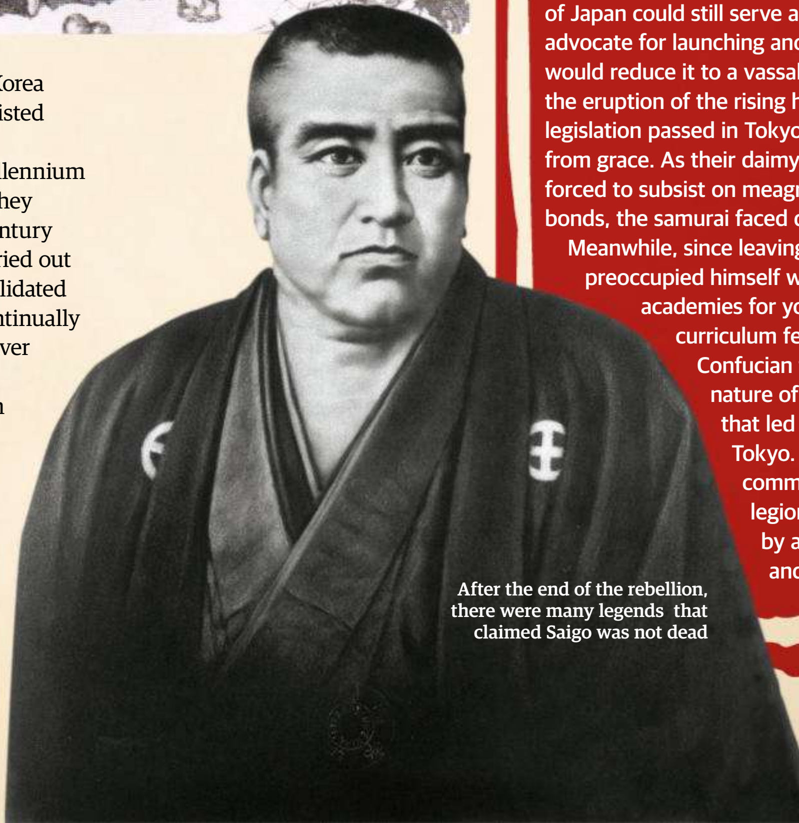
Given their high social status, the patronage of their lords and stipends in koku, samurai could afford comfortable lives. However, poor samurai families did exist. Saigo Takamori, born on 23 January 1828 in Kagoshima, came from such a family. They were of good physical stock, at least, and Saigo grew to an impressive height. Perhaps it was having six siblings – three brothers and three sisters – that moulded his natural acumen for leadership. Even with his humble origins, Saigo's early manhood saw his spectacular advancement in the service of the Shimazu clan.

Soon he was dispatched to Edo where he distinguished himself further with his tact and clarity of thinking. The memory of Saigo as a romantic figure is a stark contrast to the cunning negotiator and diplomat who fought heroically during the Boshin Civil War from 1868-69.

Saigo cut a dashing figure and was recognisable for his muscular arms and broad shoulders. Over the years his neck appeared to have vanished into his chest and the effect on his appearance suggested he was a civilised brute. In reality, he possessed a keen taste for Confucian literature and other classic texts. Accounts of his life reveal he married three times and sired at least five children. By the time he neared his 50s, Saigo was known to have been fond of warm baths and domestic bliss. A baffling claim about his private life suggested he suffered from enlarged testicles from an infection caused by a parasitic worm.

As the Meiji administration quickly rendered his social class obsolete, he clung to the belief that the samurai of Japan could still serve a purpose. He was a staunch advocate for launching another invasion of Korea that would reduce it to a vassal state. From 1870 until the eruption of the rising he led in 1877, danpatsurei legislation passed in Tokyo hastened the samurai's fall from grace. As their daimyos were soon displaced and forced to subsist on meagre pensions and government bonds, the samurai faced dire financial straits.

Meanwhile, since leaving his duties in Tokyo, Saigo preoccupied himself with founding shigakko academies for young boys, where the curriculum featured a mix of Bushido and Confucian texts. It was the paramilitary nature of activities within Satsuma that led to a confrontation with Tokyo. In February 1877, Saigo took command of a motley samurai legion. His forces were scattered by a professional conscript army and he perished in Shiroyama.



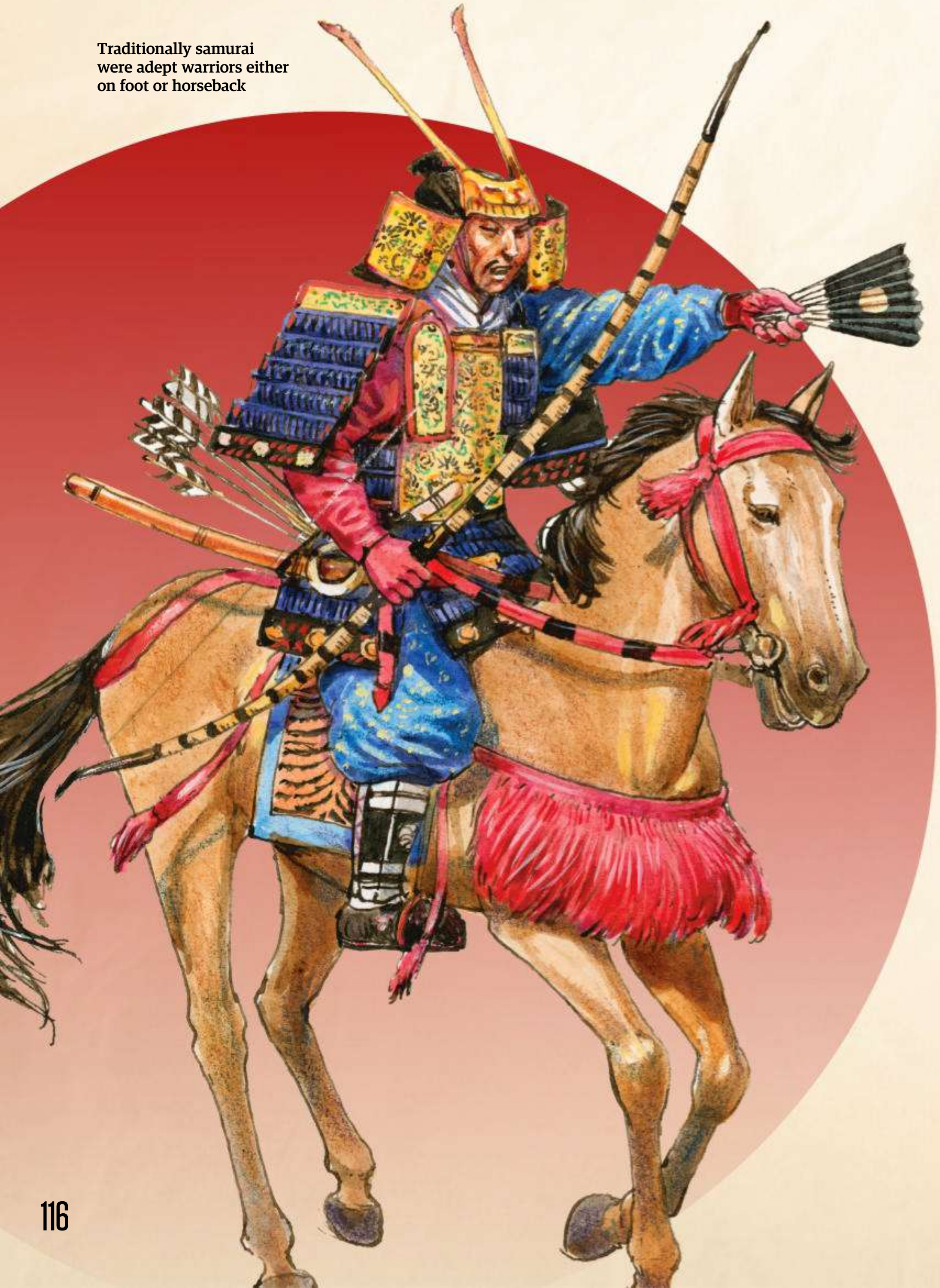
After the end of the rebellion, there were many legends that claimed Saigo was not dead present-day Hokkaido was already occupied by another indigenous group, the Ainu, who were also called Emishi.

Farther south, in the island of Kyushu where the Shimazus ruled Satsuma, Imperial governance was just as weak and sometimes nonexistent. A terrible contrast of Japanese civilisation is its startling homogeneity and social cohesion didn't mitigate the blood feuds between wealthy land-owning families.

An internal barrier to the expansion of the Japanese state was the indigenous Ainu. Having mastered fighting on horseback, these warrior bands were seen as a threat to the towns and villages of the Kanto Plain. The ancient war, the origin of which is lost to memory, was the impetus for Imperial conscription – a practice that resembled China's own method for raising armies – to defeat the Ainus.

These soldiers would eventually adopt the horsemanship of their enemies, and in what was certainly a lengthy evolution, a unique martial art arose from this fighting style involving bow and arrow. Separate disciplines also emerged for single combat, lances and halberds, and various bladed weapons. The brutal refinement that moulded these warriors carried on to their next of kin until martial bloodlines emerged.

When William the Conqueror led his Normans across the English Channel in the latter half of the 11th century, land ownership in Japan was by then monopolised by soldier families who maintained select warriors as bodyguards. As economic power slipped from the emperor's grasp and was aggrandised by these landowners, better known as daimyos, a nasty state of affairs was in the making.



Traditionally samurai were adept warriors either on foot or horseback

> "The samurai class, whose designation translated to 'the ones who serve', were a permanent fixture in Japanese life for as long as the shogunate existed"

A warrior's upbringing and mind set meant that he could never devote his energies to producing wealth. This meant the only worthwhile pursuit for enhancing power and status in Japan was conquering enemies. This led to the chronic warfare that plagued feudal Japan, with its worst phase being the 200-year civil war known as the Sengoku. It wasn't until the relative peace of the Tokugawa Shogunate which was ushered in by the warlord Ieyasu and his heirs and lasted from 1603 until 1867, that this fratricidal violence ebbed.

The samurai class, whose designation translated to 'the ones who serve', were a permanent fixture in Japanese life for as long as the Shogunate existed. The reason for their existence was codified into Bushido, whose core tenet was unfailing loyalty to the master – a daimyo. Samurai weren't just retainers and warriors, but their groupings functioned as organisations as well.

To ensure their place in the social hierarchy, samurai families inter-married and individuals collected lifelong stipends of rice. They were discouraged from any physical labour and, like other warrior classes in feudal societies, martial pursuits like hunting and fencing were preferred diversions.

Yet some samurai did practice trades to augment their incomes and rendered civil service on behalf of their masters. They also had a monopoly on violence, and this was symbolised by the iconic pairing of the single-edged katana with a long knife. The katana's inherent value to samurai was being so well crafted for duelling that no other sword sufficed. Until the right to bear arms was exclusively reserved for samurai, double-edged swords were actually common in Japan.

THE WHITE CROSS

Like a pendulum, Japan's internal state would swing from one extreme to another as it hurtled towards the modern age. The chaos that reigned in the 200-year Sengoku period, where rival samurai clans vied for power in constant civil war, eventually gave way to the Tokugawa Shogunate's martial peace.

This transition was made possible by an unlikely pairing. First, there was the rise of indomitable samurai warlords, whose

The Battle of Shiroyama

His forces scattered and surrounded by the Imperial army after the Kumamoto debacle, Saigo and his samurai escape to Kagoshima

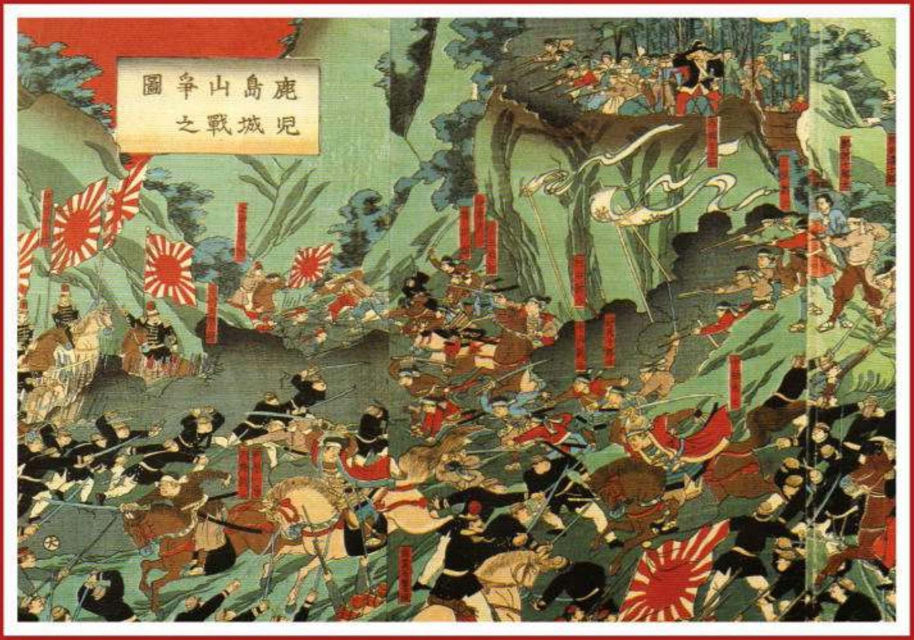
The perilous peak

With just 400 samurai left, Saigo trekked to Kagoshima, moving through hills and mountain trails. The Satsuma capital was once again vulnerable to attack, garrisoned by just 1,000 poorly trained conscripts. However, Imperial reinforcements from land and sea caught up with the rebels, who were forced to nearby Shiroyama.

The encirclement

From Mounsey's account: "The Imperials had completed their lines about the 10th of September, and they then proceeded to erect mortar-barriers, to arm their earthworks with 50-pound guns from the ships, and to shell the rebel position from them and from their men-of-war. The bombardment was carried on day and night, causing a loss of about 200 men in the rebel ranks."

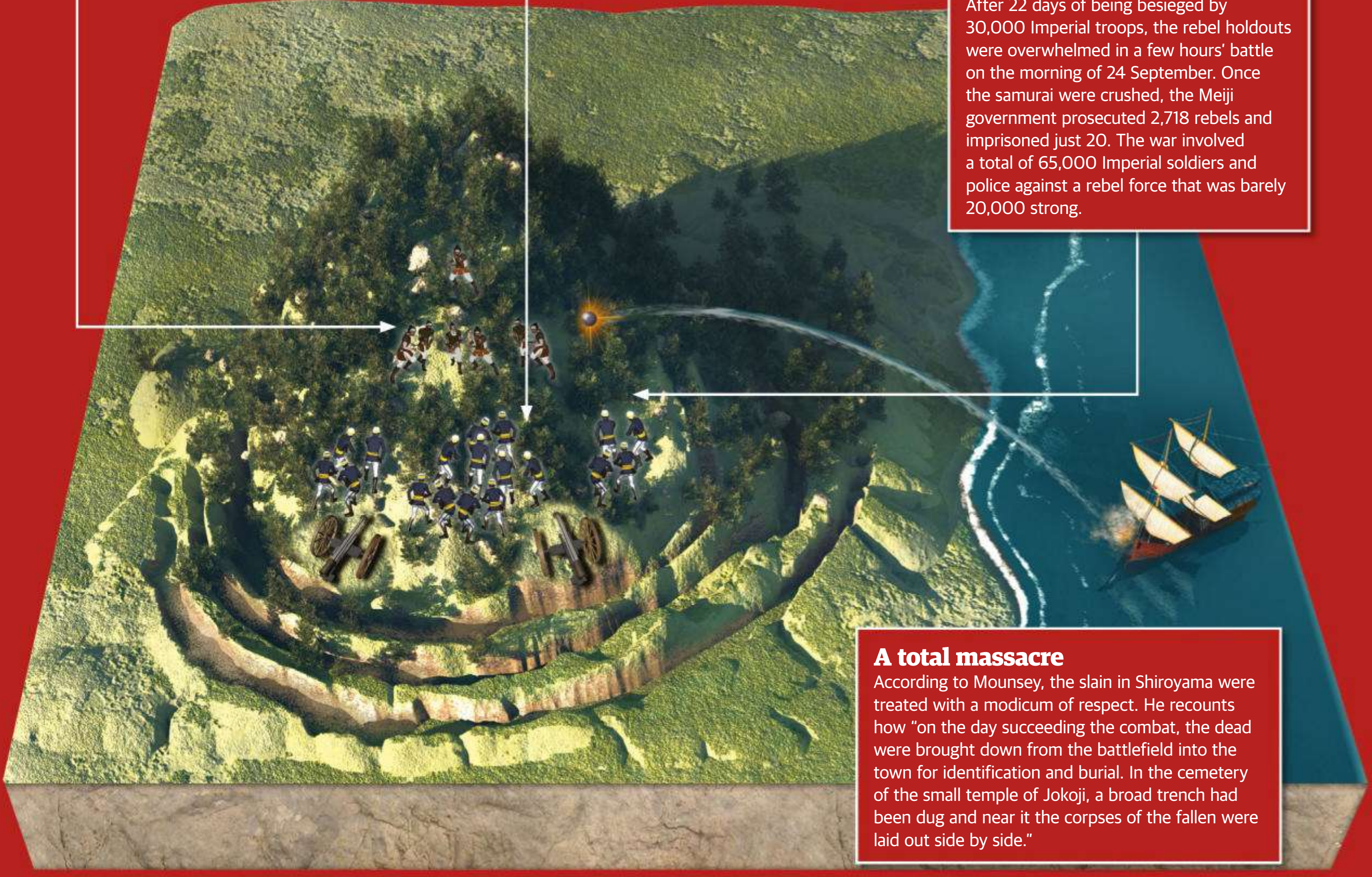
> "After 22 days of being besieged, the rebels were overwhelmed in a few hours"



Aigo can be seen ordering his men forward in the top right of this drawing of the Battle of Shiroyama

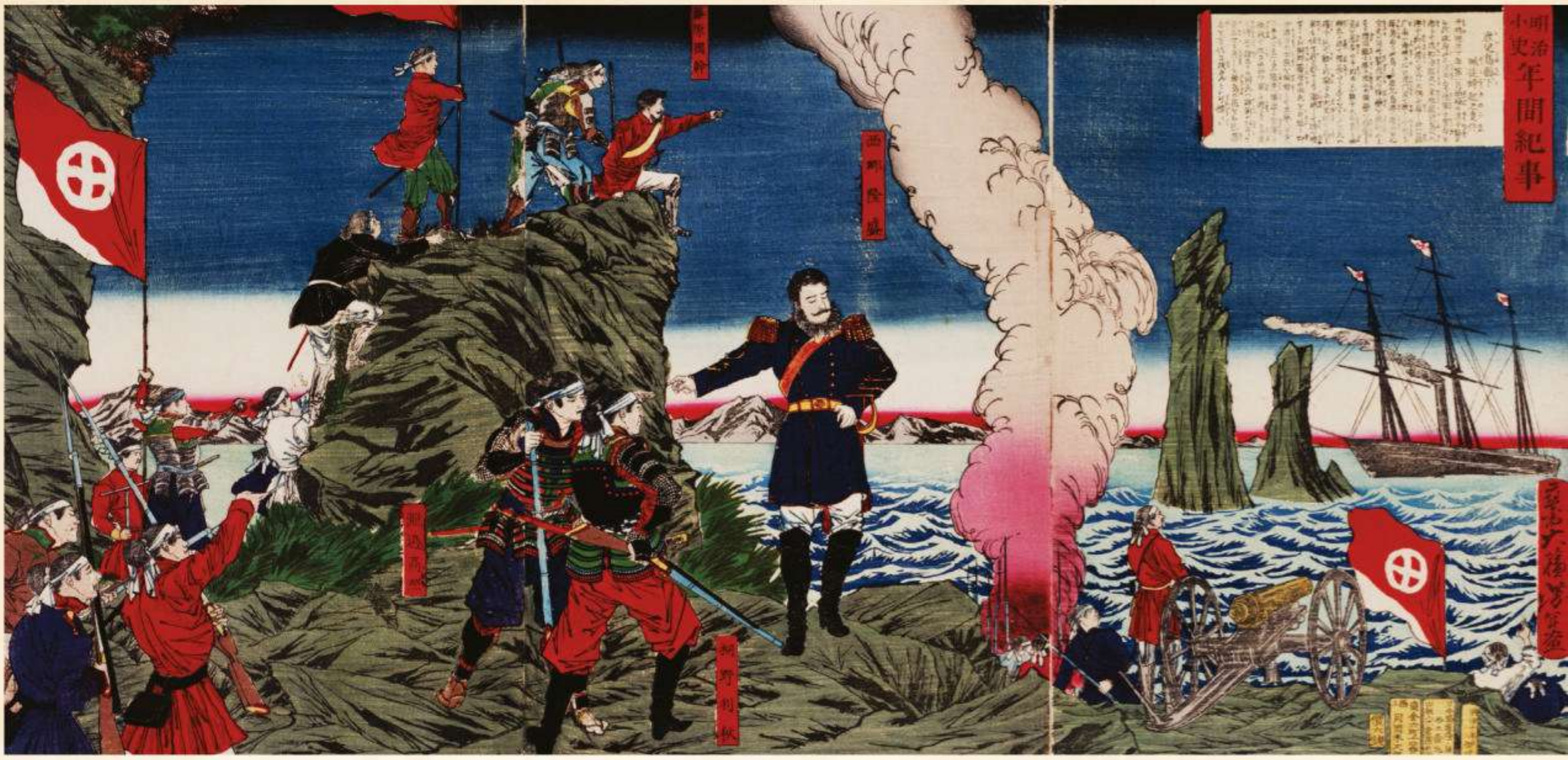
The final assault

After 22 days of being besieged by 30,000 Imperial troops, the rebel holdouts were overwhelmed in a few hours' battle on the morning of 24 September. Once the samurai were crushed, the Meiji government prosecuted 2,718 rebels and imprisoned just 20. The war involved a total of 65,000 Imperial soldiers and police against a rebel force that was barely 20,000 strong.



A total massacre

According to Mounsey, the slain in Shiroyama were treated with a modicum of respect. He recounts how "on the day succeeding the combat, the dead were brought down from the battlefield into the town for identification and burial. In the cemetery of the small temple of Jokoji, a broad trench had been dug and near it the corpses of the fallen were laid out side by side."



Saigo can be seen here, in the centre, preparing his men for the impending naval bombardment at the Battle of Shiroyama

psychological mettle gave them the iron will to crush their enemies. It began with the brutal but courageous Oda Nobunaga, who came closest to unifying Japan in the final decades of the 16th century.

His work was continued by the madman Hideyoshi Toyotomi, whose dream of subjugating Korea turned into a quagmire. He was replaced by the Machiavellian Tokugawa Ieyasu, whose gift for administration cooled the worst tendencies of the samurai class.

The second force that helped conclude Japan's civil wars were firearms. In 1543, more than half a century before the Tokugawa Shogunate was established, a group of Portuguese sailors arrived in Tanegashima. Ironically, it was an island situated not far from the bustling port of Kagoshima.

These Portuguese, who were either shipwrecked or encountering difficulties navigating local waters, presented a local daimyo with muskets. Another less reliable account suggests Spanish Jesuit missionaries eager to curry favour with their daimyo hosts gifted them with muskets.

The substances of both accounts are credible, since firearms produced in Japan took on a distinct appearance. Japanese smiths, not samurai, had no trouble reverse engineering the small arms that they called tanegashima, which resembled the Spanish arquebus with their curved handles and large bores. The Western European rifle with a complete stock and distinctive firing mechanism never proliferated in Japan.

Once whole companies of musketeers called Teppo-tai (literally "gunmen") were deployed, their impact was profound. Firearms played a decisive role in the Battle of Sekigahara on 16 October 1600, when Tokugawa Ieyasu's legions conquered the rival warlord Ishida Mitsunari and his allies.

The Tokugawa state that emerged in 1603 appears an unremarkable one under the Shogunate's bakufu, or administration, that was based in Edo, the greatest city on the Kanto Plain. To mitigate the influence wielded by the emperor, whose rank was purely symbolic, their lives were confined to the boring splendour of faraway Kyoto. A caste system was imposed by the bakufu, with the samurai at the top. Beneath them were peasants and artisans. Ultimately contemptible were the merchants at the bottom who were superior to none but the untouchables: the marginal communities who cured leather and butchered meat.

To discourage conspiracies against the Shogunate, residing in Edo became mandatory for a daimyo's kinsmen. This was an elaborate system of hostage-taking dressed up as social custom. Traditional allies of the Tokugawa's were undisturbed by this practice. The Shimazu's of Kyushu, however, were always uncomfortable with their fealty to the Shoguns.

> **"Like a pendulum, Japan's internal state would swing from one extreme to another as it hurtled towards the modern age"**

Their crest was a white cross in a white circle, like a crosshair. It was a fitting if unintentional symbol since the Shimazus maintained arsenals of their own muskets and cannon manufactured in Kagoshima.

A streak of mischief always ran in the Shimazu bloodline. Time and time again, their Satsuma domain would figure in a crisis that disturbed the Shogunate. Three years after the beginning of the Tokugawa period, Satsuma samurai overran the island called Okinawa and reduced it to a vassal state.

On 3 March 1860, the Shogun Ii Naosuke was assassinated along with his retinue while travelling in Edo. It was believed that vengeful ronin, or rogue samurai, sought to punish him for signing disadvantageous treaties with foreign barbarians, for example Europeans. The Shimazu were fanatical xenophobes and their leader Shimazu Hitsamitsu was implicated in the assault and murder of an Englishman in 1862. The diplomatic outrage provoked by the Shimazu's unrepentant refusal to apologise and compensate the victim's family led to British warships bombarding Kagoshima during the following year.

However, the Shimazu's greatest outrage was their alliance with the Choshu clan to defeat the Tokugawa Shogunate and install the 15-year-old Mutsuhito as the Meiji Emperor. When the clans and daimyos loyal to the Tokugawas rose up against this new order in what was called the Boshin Civil War in 1868 – a conflict that strangely enough inspired a brief secessionist movement in Hokkaido led by samurai

“Risings erupted in different prefectures as the samurai realised the Meiji government was legislating them out of existence”

wanting to establish a democratic republic – the emperor’s own forces were led by Satsuma’s ablest commanders: Okubo Toshimichi and Saigo Takamori.

Historians often cite two separate events to explain Japan’s shift to modernity. These were the expeditions of the American Commodore Matthew C Perry in 1853 and 1854, followed by what is referred to as the ‘Meiji Restoration’. This misses a long period of conflict within Japan’s samurai ruling class that ended with the Satsuma rebellion.

When the Meiji Emperor sought to build a professional military with European advisers, the effort coincided with the reorganisation of land ownership, the importation of a money-driven tax and banking system, and a genuine economic plan led by powerful conglomerates called zaibatsus.

Edo was renamed Tokyo and the feudal domains ruled by daimyo were declared prefectures. The daimyo lost their fortunes when the koku, or the rice stipend paid by peasant farmers, was abolished and replaced by a pension. The samurai lost their own incomes as a result. Soon their distinctive topknot hairstyles were forbidden and carrying swords in public was prohibited.

A year before the Satsuma Rebellion, a large group of samurai stormed into Kumamoto Castle and slaughtered 300 unsuspecting imperial troops. This wasn’t an isolated case – small risings erupted in different prefectures as the samurai realised the Meiji government was legislating them out of existence.

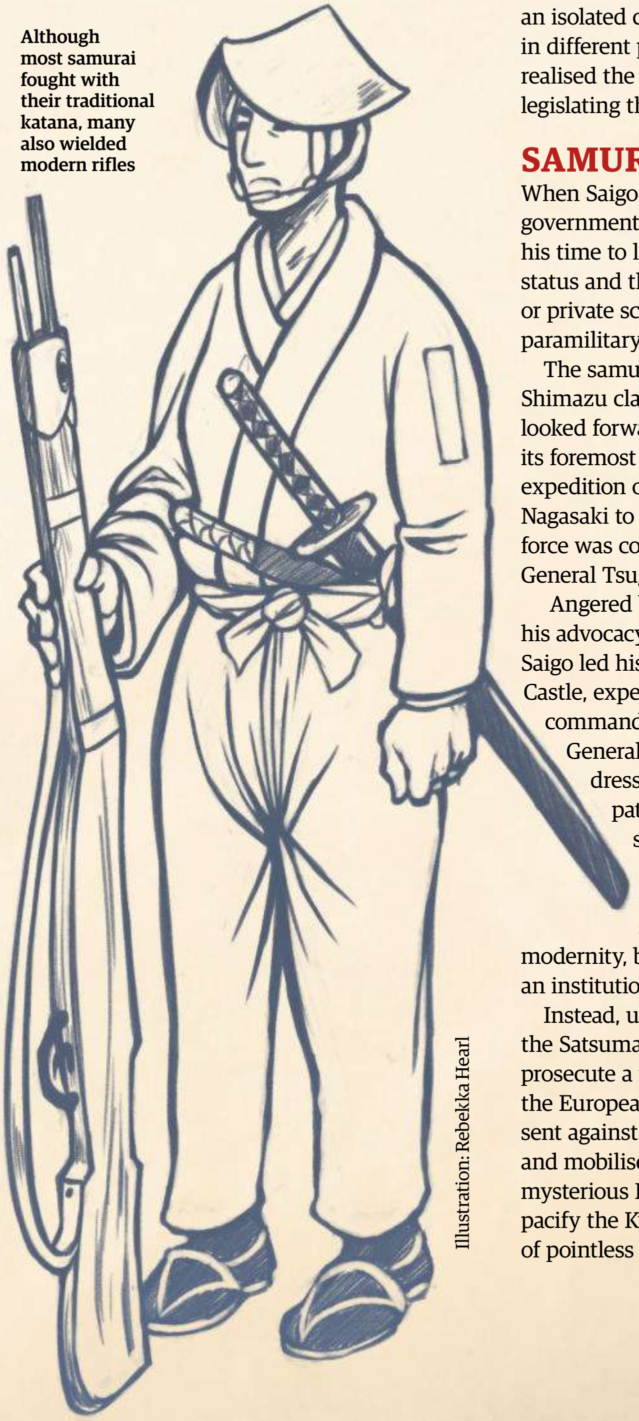
SAMURAI REQUIEM

When Saigo Takamori retired from government service in 1873, he devoted his time to leisure befitting his social status and the administration of shigakko, or private schools, offering civics and paramilitary training for young samurai.

The samurai in the domains of the Shimazu clan, especially those in Satsuma, looked forward to serving the state as its foremost military clan. In 1874, an expedition of 3,000 samurai departed from Nagasaki to invade Formosa (Taiwan). This force was commanded by Saigo’s brother, General Tsugumichi.

Angered by Tokyo’s callousness toward his advocacy for further foreign expansion, Saigo led his samurai to Kumamoto Castle, expecting to be received by the commander of its garrison, Major General Taketa Tani. Saigo even dressed in his Imperial uniform, patterned after the French style. His goal was to force a compromise with the government. This wasn’t a struggle between tradition over modernity, but to preserve the samurai as an institution.

Instead, upon their arrival in Kumamoto, the Satsuma rebels were forced to prosecute a months-long siege and battle the European-trained conscript army sent against them. Tokyo acted swiftly and mobilised 40,000 men under the mysterious Prince Arisugawa Taruhito to pacify the Kyushu rising. After months of pointless combat, in September 1877,



Although most samurai fought with their traditional katana, many also wielded modern rifles

Illustration: Rebekka Hearl

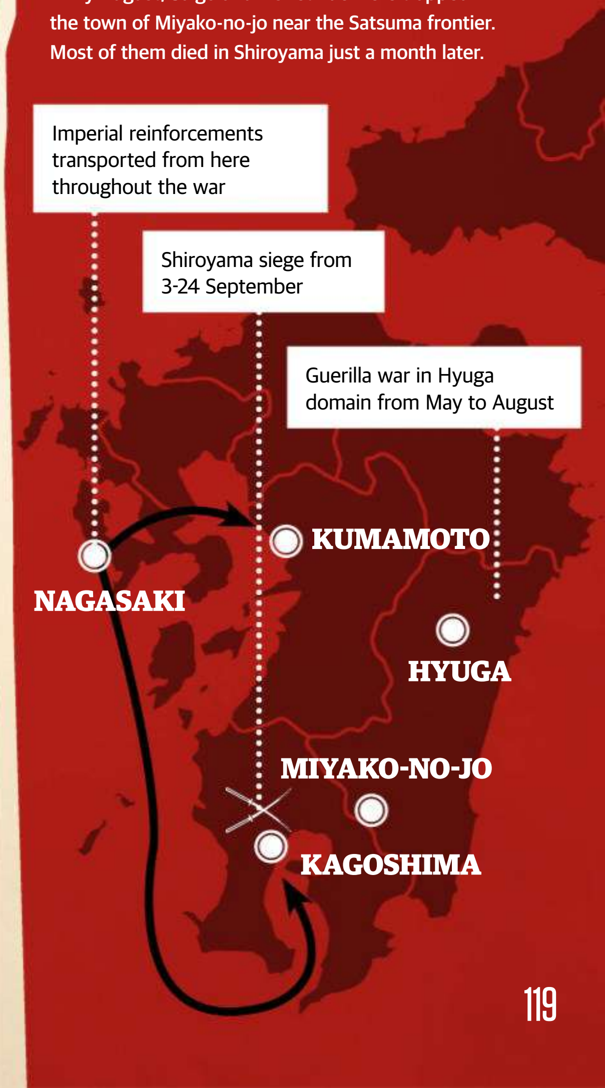
Final march of the samurai

Renowned for their martial spirit and fierce independence, thousands of Satsuma samurai rose to defend their social class from oblivion

A disturbing lack of foresight and preparation ruined the Satsuma samurai’s rebellion against Tokyo. After getting mired in a pointless siege on Kumamoto Castle from 19 February to 12 April, the rebels split into small groups and tried manoeuvring in Western Kyushu. Imperial reinforcements arriving by sea frustrated their mobility – even Kagoshima was captured from them in March.

With their ammunition dwindling, the samurai resorted to guerilla tactics. They also tried holding out in towns and villages that had castles, even though the fortresses weren’t provisioned. These barely sufficed at defeating the Imperials, although peasant conscripts suffered terrible losses against veteran samurai. Government casualties numbered 17,000 at the end of the war, with 6,900 killed in battle. Just as many rebel samurai were slain.

By August, Saigo and his retinue were trapped in the town of Miyako-no-jo near the Satsuma frontier. Most of them died in Shiroyama just a month later.



Imperial reinforcements transported from here throughout the war

Shiroyama siege from 3-24 September

Guerilla war in Hyuga domain from May to August the Satsuma samurai were scattered and defeated. The last holdouts sought refuge in Shiroyama Hill after being unable to recapture Kagoshima. The Imperial army erected barriers, dug trenches and deployed batteries to entrap the rebels. Men-of-war stationed in the harbour trained their own 50-pound guns at Shiroyama.

Soon the terrible day arrived and death claimed Saigo, ignoble and gruesome. Half his force was killed with him while more than 200 others were either maimed or captured. A day after the massacre at Shiroyama, signs were hung up on all of the notice boards in Tokyo. These public bulletins were an enduring practice from the Tokugawa era and served to inform the masses of official pronouncements. On 25 September, they read: "It is hereby made known that on the 24th, Prince Arisugawa, commander-in-chief of the army of chastisement, reported to his imperial majesty by telegraph that the rebels of Kyushu have been reduced to quiet."

Saigo Takamori's remains were buried in a mass grave with the rest of Shiroyama's fallen. Upon his return to Tokyo, Prince Arisugawa was thanked by the emperor and awarded the Order of the Chrysanthemum. The incorrigible samurai of Satsuma were forever humbled, and from then on devoted themselves to the state. Their stock begat generals and war heroes who served with distinction in the imperial army and navy.

The hidden legacy of Saigo Takamori and his outlaw samurai would resonate in the national consciousness and the national will in the 20th century. Just 18 years after Satsuma industrialised Japan, hungry markets and resources started the first of many wars with China. This set it on course to war in the Pacific and humiliating defeat at the hands of the Allies. Arguably this was the spirit of Satsuma writ large, a timeless episode where glorious struggle and hubris possessed the samurai and doomed them. This is why 1877 is remembered as Gotterdammerung for Japan's warrior class.

The old and the new

How Western military tactics were adopted by both Imperials and rebels alike to claim victory on the field

Barely lasting eight months, Satsuma was the first great test of the original Imperial Japanese Army. After nearly a decade of being moulded by foreign advisers and the new tactics needed to fight modern wars, the conscript force was unprepared for the nature of the conflict with the Satsuma rebels.

Worse, their samurai foes had firearms and artillery too. The deciding factor became mass. Having embraced the institutions of European states, – i.e. a police force, compulsory education, corporations and a parliament – Tokyo could afford levying as many fighting men as it could, peasant and samurai alike, and deploy them to Kyushu for battle.

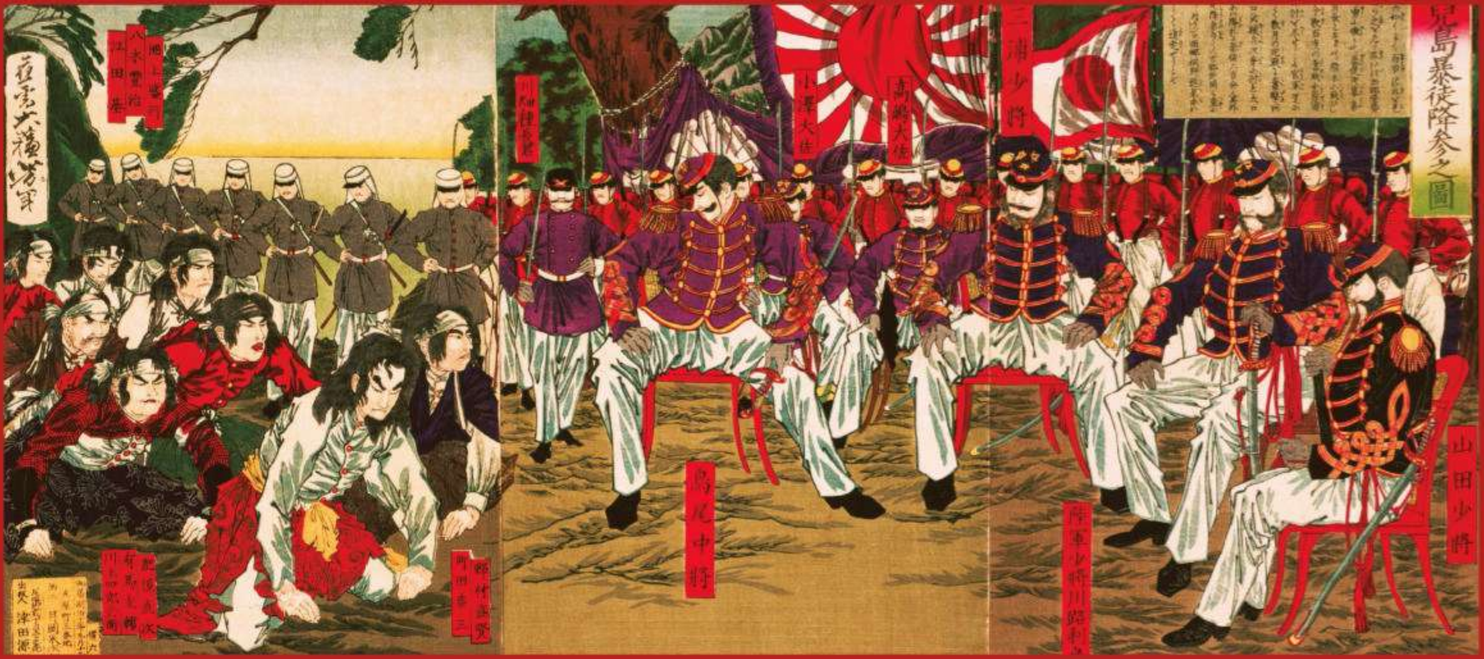
Another edge the Imperials had over the Satsuma rebels was command of the sea. Despite being a coastal domain, there were no indigenous warships in Satsuma and Kagoshima. This made it easier to transport reinforcements from Nagasaki and Tokyo. There was significant overlap between the Imperial army the samurai forces. The latter were just as committed to adopting European weapons; rifles were standard issue for either side. The difference became much more evident in close quarters: the samurai excelled at battling their social inferiors – the imperial conscripts with peasant backgrounds.

However, the Imperial army was full of samurai too, and it was led by aristocratic samurai officers. As the conflict dragged on, the ranks of the police forces in Satsuma were swelled with samurai from prefectures whose ruling clans were antagonistic toward the rebels. This was a deliberate tactic employed by the Meiji government to finally crush Saigo's forces.

The imperial army proved its mettle in the encirclement of Shiroyama. This was where all the old modes of warfare, like single combat and manoeuvre, were discarded. The forces under Prince Arisugawa encircled the remnants of Saigo's rebel army and erected barricades and other obstacles to surround Shiroyama.

In what could possibly be a first in the annals of Japanese warfare until then, the Imperial army softened the rebels' position with an unrelenting artillery barrage. The sheer volume of fire, with an estimated 7,000 shells fired on Shiroyama in 22 days, broke the defenders, who were then completely overrun by infantry columns racing up the slopes in their crisp French uniforms. The ensuing battle was an anti-climactic one, and Satsuma's defiance perished like mountain fog on the morning of 24 September.

This was more than a victory of superior numbers over unbreakable will. It proved that a parochial and localised force was no match against a modern state mobilised for total war.


児島暴徒降参之圖
鳥尾中将
山田少将

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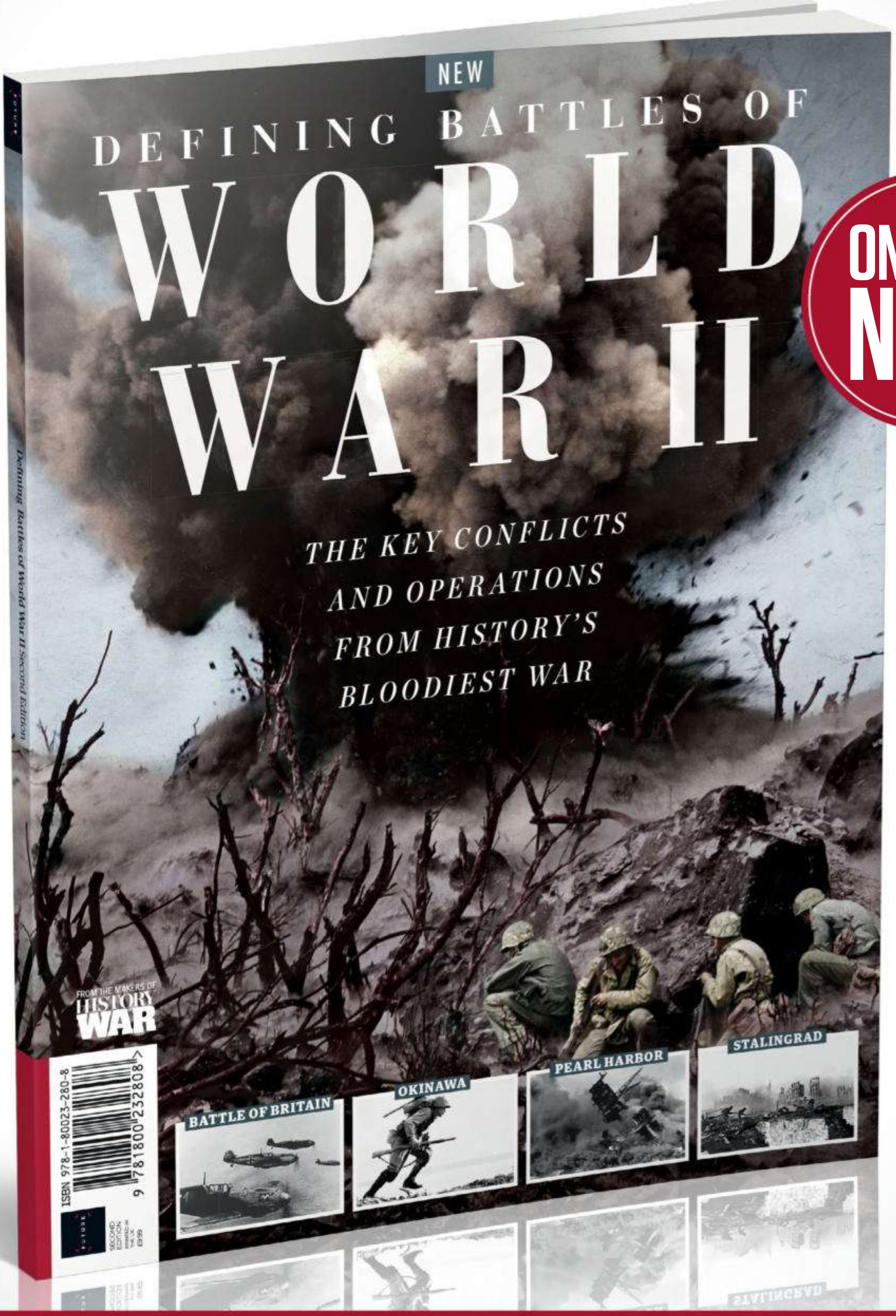
DISCOVER THE BATTLES THAT DECIDED THE WORLD'S MOST DEVASTATING WAR

The cataclysm that was World War II may have been started by the genocidal desires of a mad man, but it was settled by blood and steel. From El Alamein to Stalingrad, these are the battles that shaped history's deadliest conflict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The art of samurai warfare

Although the samurai are best known for their elite swordplay, their most remarkable skill was the ability to adapt

Written by Hareth Al Bustani

At the time of Taira no Masakado's 10th-century uprising, Japanese warfare was known as kyūba no michi, 'the way of the horse and bow' or kyūsen no michi, 'the way of the bow and arrow'. At the heart of each army was a core of mounted archers, drawn from powerful families, responsible for maintaining their own horses and equipment. Dressed in scaled armour, although these leaders carried swords, hand-to-hand combat was mostly reserved for their peasant followers.

As power transferred from the emperor into the hands of the country's distant landowners, armies continued to grow in size and sophistication. While an army of thousands was at one point described as "as numerous as the clouds", by the time that the Genpei War broke out in 1180, armies could number in the tens of thousands. Rather than simply handing peasants spears, local leaders now trained their soldiers from childhood, producing a class of warriors, or bushi, with a distinct sense of martial pride. Although battles were still largely characterised by mounted archery and spearmen, every bushi carried a long sword, called a tachi, and a short sword, the uchigatana - mainly reserved for single combat.

These early samurai took combat so seriously that if a boy was left-handed, they would train it out of them, lest it disadvantage them on the battlefield. The youth were coached in martial arts, swordplay, archery and horse-riding. One of the more extreme forms of training was inuoumono, a sport where participants hunted down wild dogs, on horseback with bow and arrow.

The Genpei War's greatest generals were not just ferocious, charismatic leaders, but brilliant strategists. When Minamoto no Yoshinaka ran into a Taira army eight times the size of his own at Mount Tonamiyama, he tricked the enemy into thinking his own force was much larger than it was by mounting decoy battle standards atop a nearby hill - hence delaying the enemy's attack.

Japanese warfare was incredibly ritualised, and battles began with a series of demonstrations of bravado; warriors yelled out their names and ranks, and searched out worthy opponents to duel with. Yoshinaka used this to his advantage, sending out a small troupe to initiate an archery duel, while sneaking another two detachments behind the Taira rear. At sunset, one of those units unleashed a stampede of oxen, with burning torches attaches to their horns, goring 20,000 Taira warriors.

Although the samurai emerged from the Genpei War as the masters of Japan, the Kamakura bakufu was dealt a rude wake-up call with the 13th-century Mongol invasions. The formal samurai were totally unprepared for the unforgiving shock-and-awe Mongol war machine. As the Mongol armada approached, when one of the samurai fired a whistling arrow to alert the gods to the forthcoming battle, the invaders burst out laughing - responding with a barrage of exploding bombs and poisoned arrows.

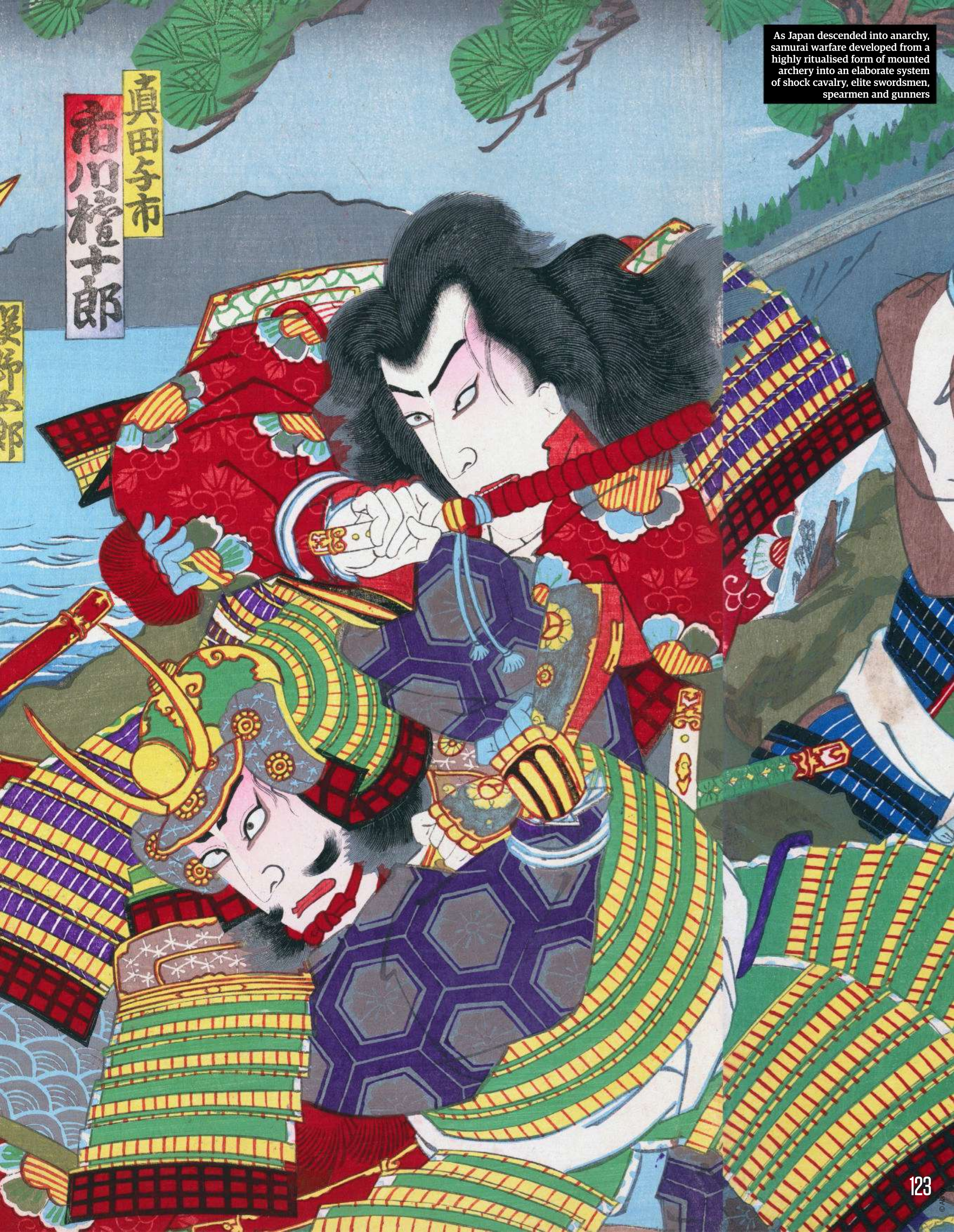
When the two sides finally clashed on the shore, the difference was even more stark. While the Mongols were disciplined, fighting in tight formation, the 5,000 samurai defenders were chaotic - more concerned with obtaining personal glory than operating as a unit. Forgoing any sense of tactics or strategy, they hurled themselves thoughtlessly into the fray, desperately hoping to wrench off as many Mongol heads as they possibly could. Despite the clear tactical disadvantage, this samurai bravado saw them cut down a staggering 13,500 enemies, successfully repelling the first Mongol wave.

By the time the Mongols returned seven years later, the samurai had learned a valuable lesson. Mobilising the entire realm in a state of emergency, they built a 20-kilometre-long defensive wall across Hakata Bay, with archers and cavalry stationed behind. Unable to overcome the bulwark, the Mongols regrouped at some nearby islands, only to find themselves on the receiving end of an endless series of raids. Sailing aboard newly constructed warships, the Samurai ditched ritual for guerrilla warfare - executed, of course, with suicidal gusto.

Warriors such as Kusano Jirō launched night attacks on stray Mongol ships, dodging stones hurled from modified Chinese crossbows to get there. On one occasion, Jirō and his men used their own mast to board a Mongol vessel, killing 21 invaders before setting the ship alight. The Japanese raids were so effective, the Mongols ended up binding their ships together with chains and plank bridges in a bid to deter future attacks. However, when a typhoon struck, the entire Mongol fleet was smashed together and destroyed.

While the samurai had miraculously come together to survive two Mongol invasions, by the 16th century, Japan's central government had completely collapsed. Amid the chaos, every warlord in the country sensed an opportunity to enlarge their domains and carve out their own paths to the capital of Kyoto. The country erupted into a state of perpetual warfare, with neighbouring realms feuding incessantly for regional dominance.

One of the fiercest rivalries was between Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin, who fought successive battles on the plain of Kawanakajima,



As Japan descended into anarchy, samurai warfare developed from a highly ritualised form of mounted archery into an elaborate system of shock cavalry, elite swordsmen, spearmen and gunners

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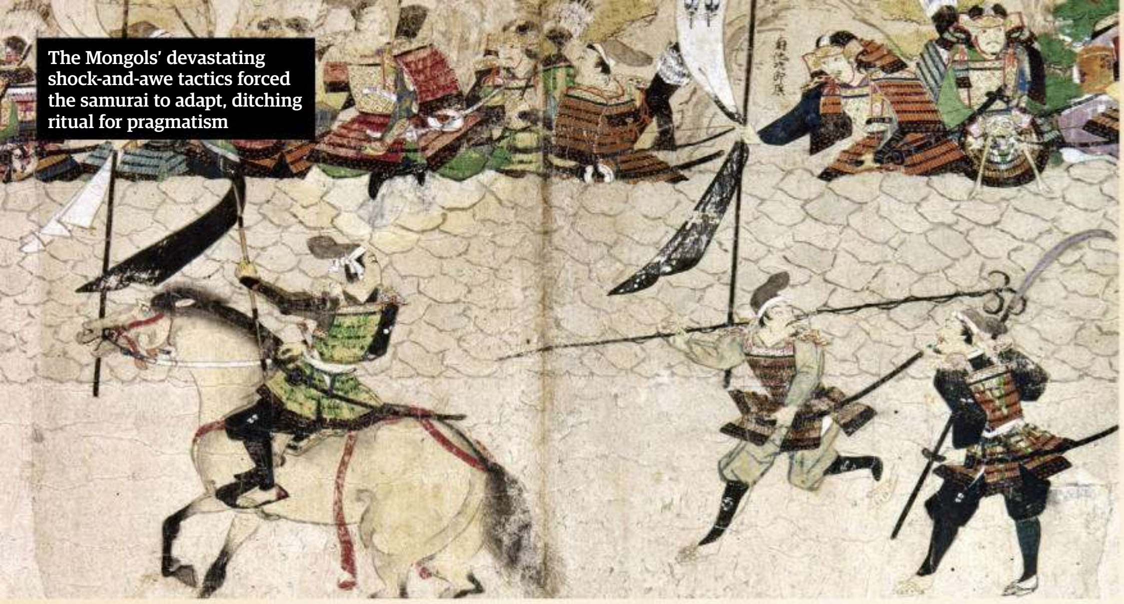

The Mongols' devastating shock-and-awe tactics forced the samurai to adapt, ditching ritual for pragmatism

in the heart of Honshu, for more than a decade. Shingen's 33,736-strong army was composed of warriors drawn from family members, hereditary vassals and defeated enemies. As Japan's greatest master of the horse, almost one-third of his army were cavalrymen. His favoured tactic was norikuzushi, where horsemen and footsoldiers smashed into missile troupes in a great co-ordinated charge, shattering them. His cavalry would then splinter through the broken enemy line, routing them.

These tactics represented a shift away from mounted archery towards new spear-based shock cavalry tactics. The transition, in turn, prompted generals to begin arming footsoldiers with three-metre-long pikes to defend against cavalry charges, and then elite swordsmen to hack down the other melee fighters. Strategies became increasingly complex, requiring ever-greater numbers of soldiers. Desperate to fill their ranks, having already exhausted the supply of elite samurai nobles, warlords were forced to recruit footsoldiers from the lowest echelons of society – the ashigaru 'light feet' peasants, who had absconded from their villages, and robbers.

Every warrior carried two swords – a short sword known as a wakizashi, and a longer one with a curved blade, the iconic katana. Crafting these blades was an art form of the highest magnitude, involving layer upon layer of forging, heating, hammering and folding. However, while swordplay was the most celebrated of martial traditions, on the battlefield, the blade still took a backseat to the spear – which could feature long, short or even crossblade tips, used to pull riders from horses.

This drastic strategic overhaul coincided with the arrival of Portuguese merchants, who washed ashore the island of Tanegashima, on the southernmost tip of Japan, in 1543. The traders introduced the local samurai to the matchlock rifle known as the arquebus, which rapidly spread across the country. Asides from Shingen, one of the earliest adopters of this new technology was the upstart Oda Nobunaga. With very few elite warriors at his disposal, Nobunaga embraced the ashigaru and the arquebus alike, recognising that even the least capable peasants could very quickly be trained to fire muskets effectively.

After being on the receiving end of a devastating volley attack, he worked this into his own repertoire. At the decisive 1575 Battle of Nagashino against Shingen, Nobunaga demonstrated perhaps the greatest use of arquebusiers in Japanese history, setting up three lines of musketmen behind stakes, situated 50 metres from a stream. While Shingen's unrivalled shock charge could absorb a single volley, three successive rounds of fire decimated wave after wave of cavalry, allowing Nobunaga to use his numbers to score a decisive victory.

> "Three successive rounds of fire decimated wave after wave of cavalry"

Samurai tactics

The battlefield tactics of this fearsome fighting force revealed

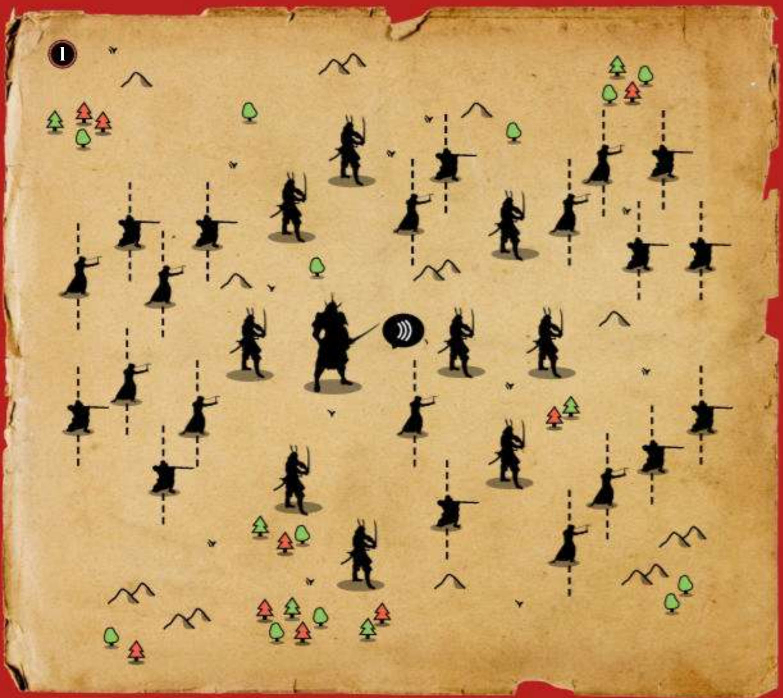
Samurai warfare reached its apex with the arrival of the arquebus matchlock. However, combat was not entirely homogenous; different regions each had their own strengths. With the entire realm embroiled in a state of total war, the most capable warlords devised a series of elaborate strategies, designed to leverage their own natural advantages.

These were often given poetic names, such as Ganko, or 'Birds in Flight', a fluid formation where gunners were stationed at the front, rear and flanks. For a brutal charge, one would use the Hoshi 'Arrowhead' formation, where the samurai vanguard were positioned in a sharp arrow shape, designed to smash through the enemy line. In response, a defending army might use the Saku 'Keyhole' formation, where thick lines of gunners and archers were used to soften the enemy charge, with a cushion of elite samurai wrapped around the general.

Commanders would often sit on a small lacquered stool atop a hill, behind screens called the 'maku', issuing orders across the battlefields through drums, conch-shells and gongs. However, the greatest samurai generals like Yoshitsune, Nobunaga and Ieyasu frequently risked their own lives, fighting alongside their men. Ieyasu once said, "It is a mistake to think that battles can be won by sitting on a camp stool giving orders, baton in hand…In a fight the best thing is to charge with the greatest vigour."

BATTLE FORMATIONS

ARCHERS ARQUEBUSIERS

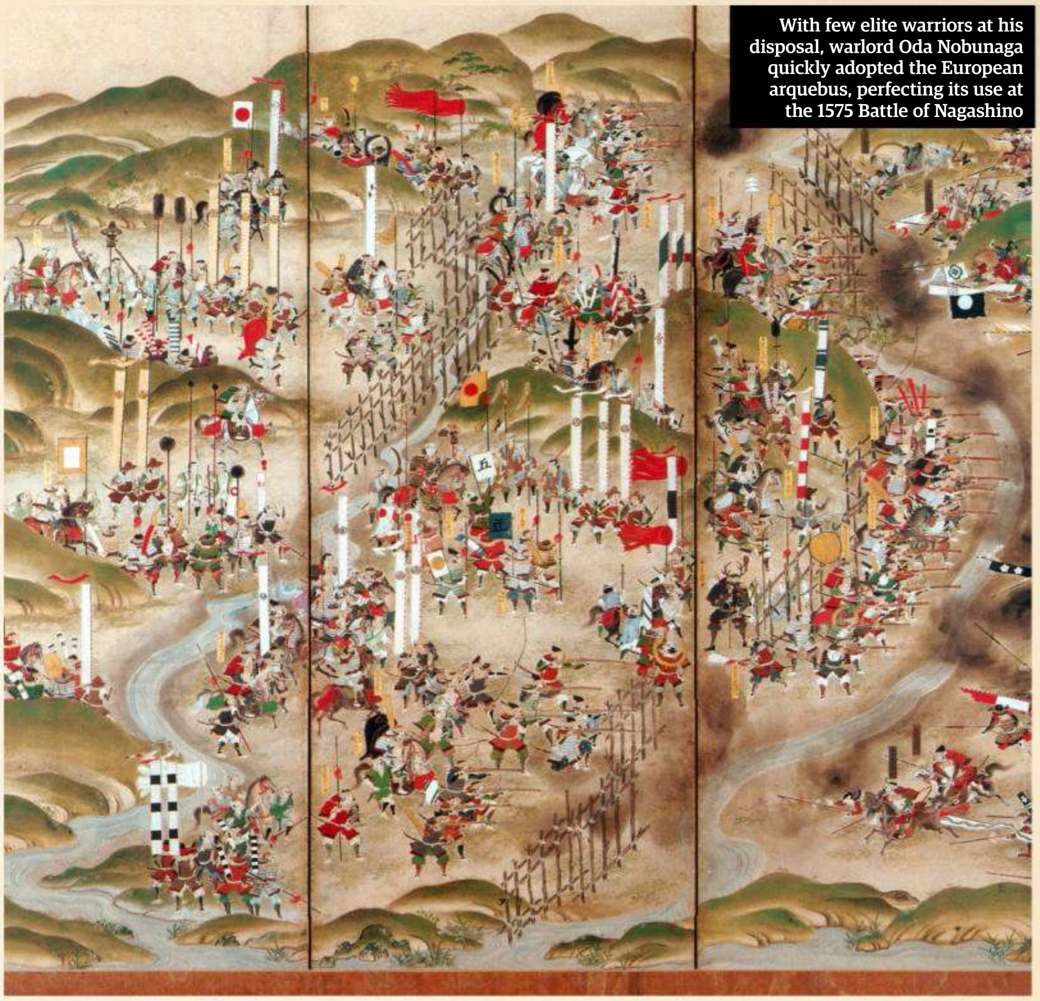


Ever the innovator, Nobunaga also invented Japan's first armoured ship, cladding six vessels in iron and fitting them with cannons. Although one of these capsized under its own weight, a small fleet of them was said to have routed 600 ships – not bad for a new innovation.

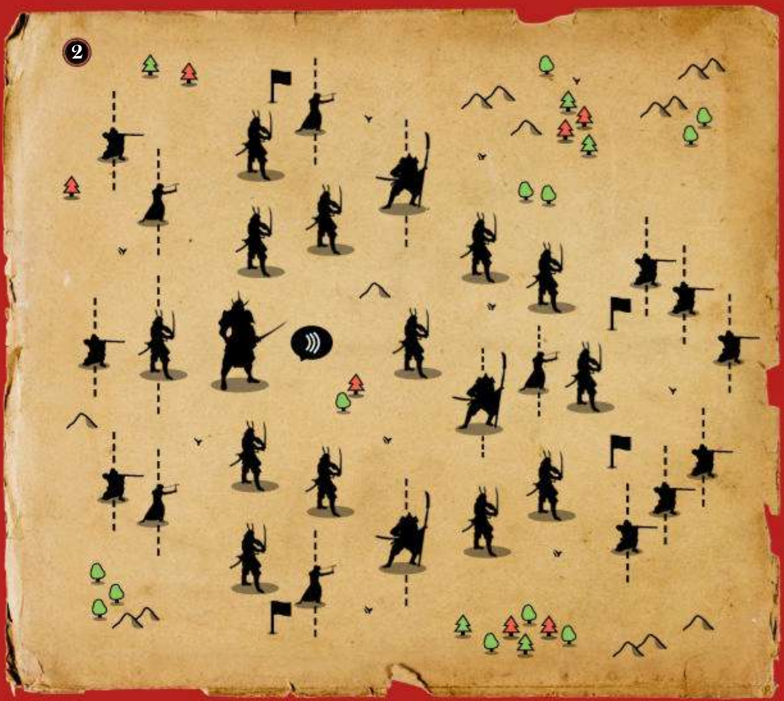
Having conquered most of Japan, Nobunaga's successor, Hideyoshi, was able to mobilise hundreds of thousands of soldiers with deadly precision. Similarly, city-castles had grown into huge, magnificent strongholds, built to endure lengthy sieges. During the siege of Takamatsu Castle, rather than waiting out a traditional siege, Hideyoshi instead had his men build a mile-long dam and a series of dykes, redirecting a river and using it to flood the castle.

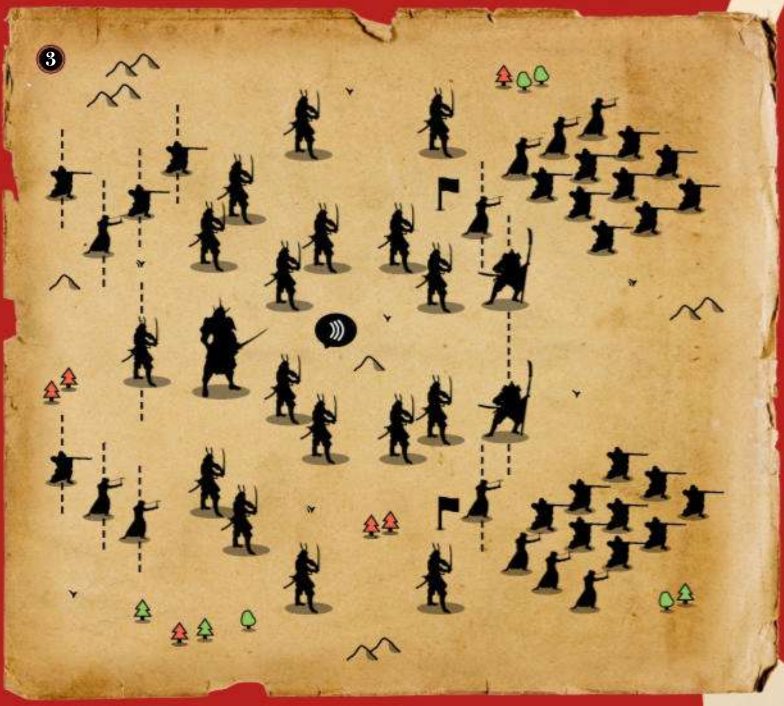
This timeless samurai war for conquest reached its natural climax in the Battle of Sekigahara, where Tokugawa Ieyasu and his Eastern allies faced down the supporters of Hideyoshi's young son, Hideyori. It was a brutal, chaotic engagement, featuring all the hallmarks of samurai warfare: elite swordplay, bravado, mastery of terrain, cavalry charges, deception, arquebuses and even psychological warfare using cannons. In the aftermath, the Tokugawa shogunate ushered in centuries of peace, leaving the samurai perpetually preparing for another war that would not come.

By the time of the Meiji Restoration, the samurai who did resist found their traditional martial training rendered utterly obsolete in the face of modern industrial warfare. With that, the age of the samurai as a fighting force was over.


With few elite warriors at his disposal, warlord Oda Nobunaga quickly adopted the European arquebus, perfecting its use at the 1575 Battle of Nagashino

SAMURAI SPEARMEN COMMANDER SIGNALS FLAGS





Feudal Japanese armour

Samurai armour designs evolved over a millennium, as the weapons favoured by these renowned warriors transitioned from the bow, to pole arms, and ultimately, highly effective firearms

Written by Trevor Absolon

There are few places in the world where the iconic image of a fierce, sword-wielding samurai of Japan's feudal past is not recognised. There can be no doubt that the highly unique and truly distinctive forms of body armour worn by these renowned warriors played a significant role in imprinting the image of the samurai on the global consciousness. For very few military items in history have so skilfully combined artistic beauty with practical battle-worthy functionality and form.

While 'samurai armour' appears regularly in films, pop culture literature and video games, it is seldom depicted correctly. One reason for this is the fact that there is no one definitive form of Japanese armour, as the construction and design of samurai armour evolved over the course of a millennium, with the weaponry utilised by these warriors being the driving force behind most of the evolutionary changes that occurred.

The rise of the samurai in the 10th century coincided with the development of a form of tightly laced, lamellar armour assembled from thousands of small, lacquered rawhide scales. These so-called 'yoroi' forms of armour, with their large static shield-like shoulder guards were primarily designed to provide protection from arrows, as the bow was the primary weapon of the samurai until well into the 14th century.

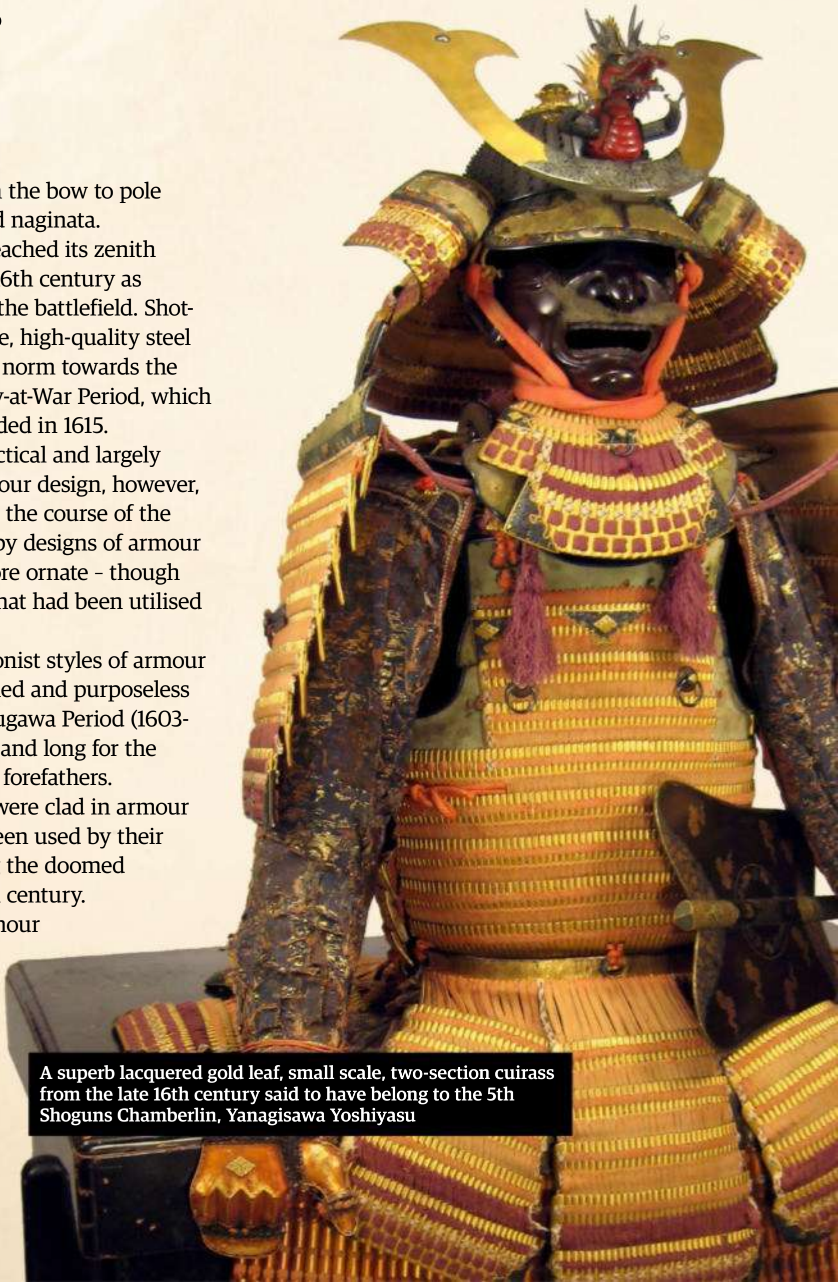
Scale armour gradually gave way to increasingly more sparingly laced solid-plate forms of armour towards the end of the 15th century. This reflected the samurai's transition from the bow to pole arms like the yari (spear) and naginata.

Armour design in Japan reached its zenith during the latter half of the 16th century as firearms began to dominate the battlefield. Shot-proof, streamlined, solid-plate, high-quality steel items of armour became the norm towards the end of the infamous Country-at-War Period, which began in 1467 and finally ended in 1615.

These highly resilient, practical and largely unembellished forms of armour design, however, were gradually replaced over the course of the 18th and early 19th century by designs of armour that mimicked the much more ornate – though obsolete – forms of armour that had been utilised in the preceding centuries.

This trend towards revisionist styles of armour was driven by the disillusioned and purposeless samurai of the peaceful Tokugawa Period (1603-1868), who began to idealise and long for the perceived glory days of their forefathers.

Ironically, many warriors were clad in armour not unlike that which had been used by their samurai predecessors during the doomed Mongol invasions of the 13th century. They were sporting such armour when the steam-driven US Navy gunboats under Commodore Perry showed up to strong-arm Japan into opening itself up to Western trade and commerce in 1853.



A superb lacquered gold leaf, small scale, two-section cuirass from the late 16th century said to have belong to the 5th Shoguns Chamberlin, Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu

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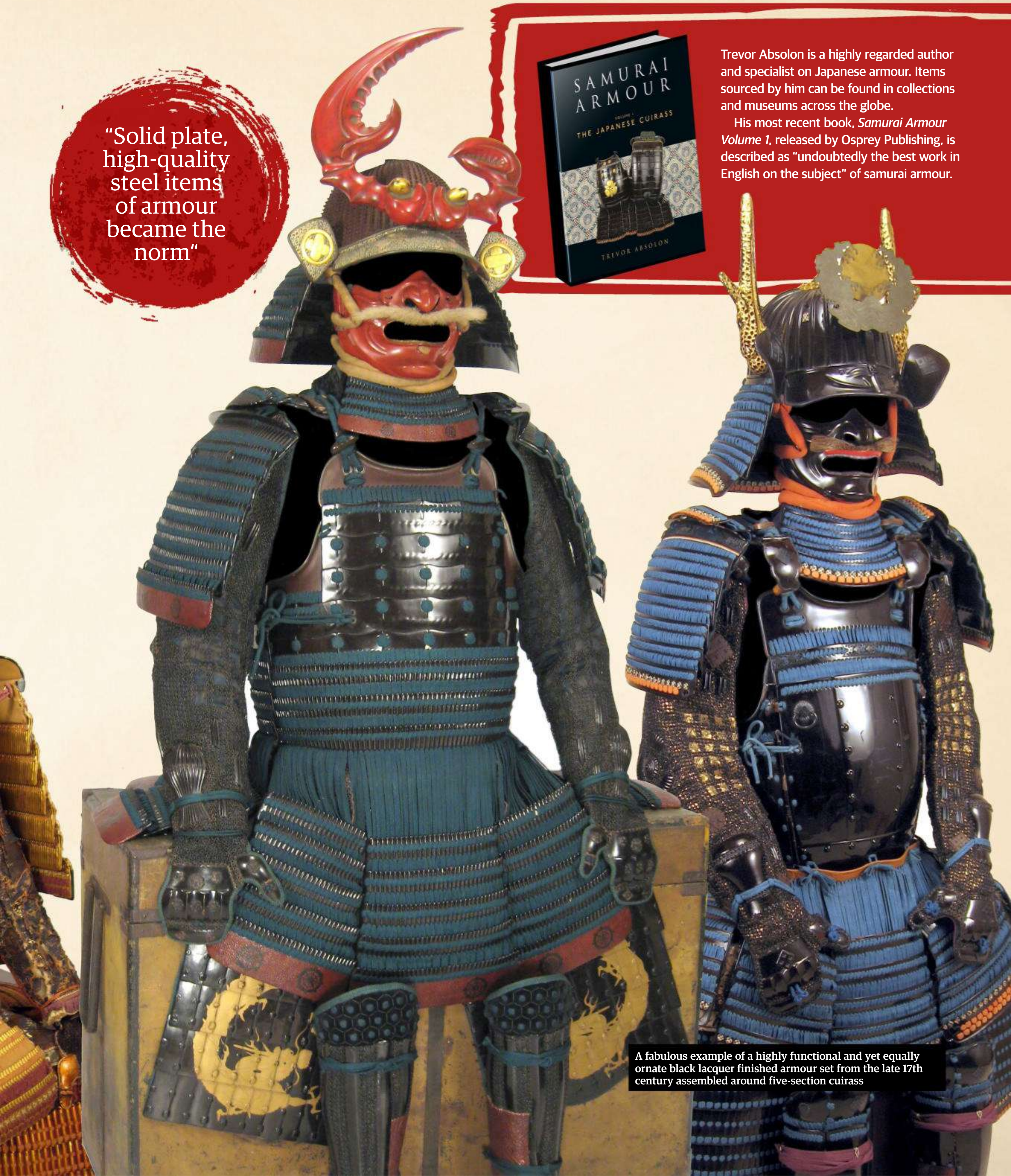
> "Solid plate, high-quality steel items of armour became the norm"

Trevor Absolon is a highly regarded author and specialist on Japanese armour. Items sourced by him can be found in collections and museums across the globe.

His most recent book, *Samurai Armour Volume 1*, released by Osprey Publishing, is described as "undoubtedly the best work in English on the subject" of samurai armour.



A fabulous example of a highly functional and yet equally ornate black lacquer finished armour set from the late 17th century assembled around five-section cuirass

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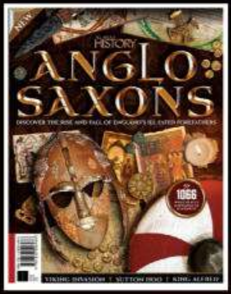

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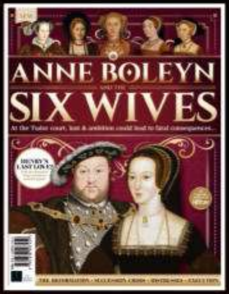

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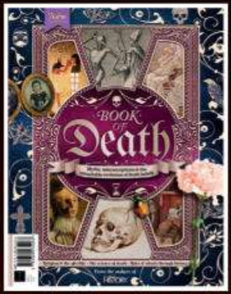

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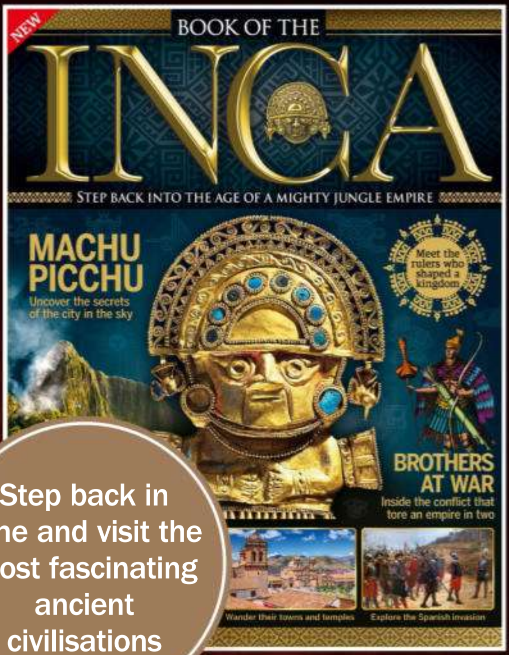

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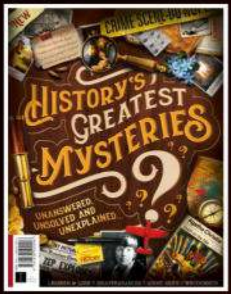

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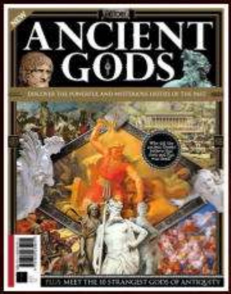

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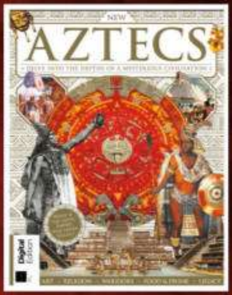

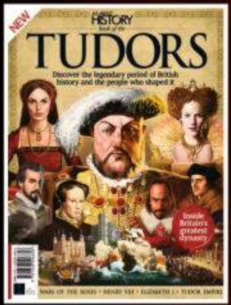

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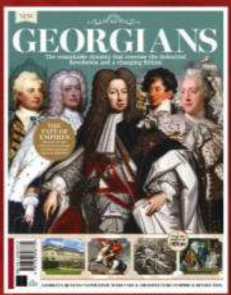

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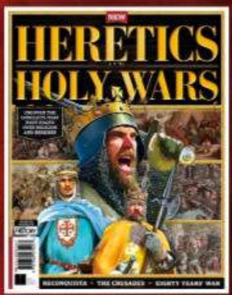

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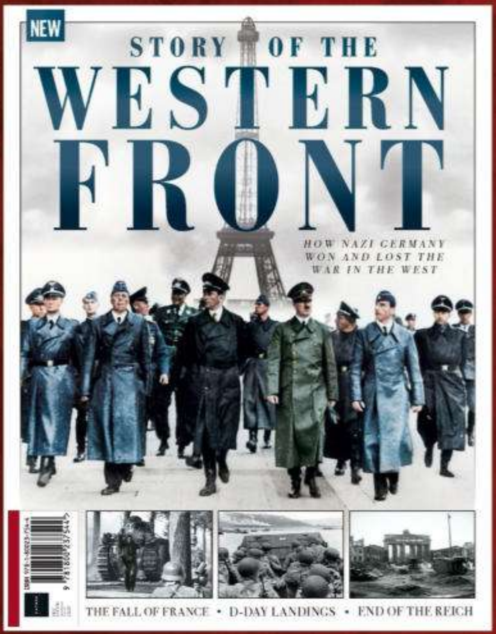

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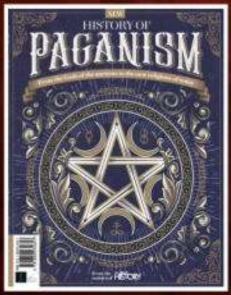
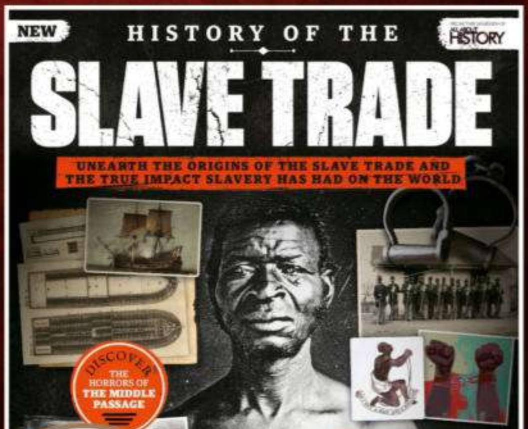

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The Way of the Warrior

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